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**"I Don't Go Out Looking To Harm Somebody":
An Exploratory Study of Young Women and Violence**

by

Cheryl D. Nelson, BSW

**A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Social Work**

**School of Social Work
Carleton University
Ottawa, Ontario**

September 2001

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and Research acceptance of the Thesis**

**"I Don't Go Out Looking To Harm Somebody":
An Exploratory Study of Young Women and Violence**

submitted by Cheryl D. Nelson, BSW

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for

the degree of Master of Social Work

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ABSTRACT

The issue of youth violence and supposedly growing rates of female adolescent violence has been capturing public attention. The purpose of this research study was to gather the stories of young women aged twelve to twenty years on their experiences of violence, both as perpetrators and as victims, to understand better the contours of their lives and to add their voices to the literature. Using a socialist feminist framework, it explores young women's perceptions of being identified (by themselves or others) as violent, the social and economic context of their lives, and how they make sense of their participation in violence. It describes turning points in the young women's lives that influenced their decisions to move away from violence. The young women offer advice to other women in similar circumstances and outline ways that social workers and helping professionals can better respond. To this, the writer puts forward several initiatives that are effective alternatives to addressing young women's use of violence and is central to reducing structured inequality in society. Finally, the young women make suggestions for gender-specific services and programs.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to express my deepest appreciation to the ten young women whose stories are told here. This research would not have been possible without their openness and trust. I thank them for their time and their help, and for sharing aspects of their lives usually kept hidden. I hope that the people who read this thesis will learn as much from the young women as I have.

In addition, I would like to extend my sincere appreciation to Dr. Colleen Lundy, my thesis supervisor. She read early drafts of the thesis and offered encouragement and suggestions. She offered unfailing support and discussions of concepts. At later stages, Colleen's careful reading and editing of chapters helped sharpen and focus my ideas and significantly improved this study. I also profited from my second reader's, Dr. Gerald deMontigny, nuanced comments on the many drafts. Both Colleen and Gerald imparted to me a feeling of commitment to the subject matter.

As always, however, my love and appreciation go to my family – my husband, Bill, and my son, Matthew, for their everlasting love, strength, and encouragement. This work has been a part of our lives for the last year. During that time, Bill shared his insights, offered critical commentary, and edited difficult sections, and I am truly grateful for his support.

I have conducted this study with the deep hope that it might influence our understanding of young women and their engagement in violence and focus attention on preventing the anger that comes from their alienation in our society. I join other social workers that warn of the perils of isolation and emphasize the importance of positive relationships for all aspects of human functioning, including violence.

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CHAPTER 1

Starting the Journey

Violent and aggressive behaviour in young women remains one of the most perplexing areas for policymakers, program managers, and scholars. This is because young women's use of violence is seen as deviant from both law-abiding behaviour and from typical female sex-role expectations (Campbell, 1986). Consequently, the little attention it has received has often been anecdotal or sensationalist media-related stories and has been directed towards the more violent crimes, such as murder and homicide (Jones, 1980; Kaihla, DeMont & Wood, 1994; Rosenblatt & Greenland, 1974; see also Schissel, 1997). The study of young women and violence as a phenomenon in itself has only recently begun to receive due attention. While young women commit proportionately far fewer serious and violent crimes than males, a review of official statistics for youth violent crimes in Canada in recent years indicate that young women's involvement in violent offending is increasing (Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, 2000).

Referring only to those youth who become involved in the criminal justice system, the Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics (2000) reported that the total number of cases before youth courts decreased from 115,187 in 1992/93 to 106,665 in 1998/99. However, the number of cases involving female youth rose from 20,775 to 22,535 in the same period. Of the six crime categories reported in the survey (i.e. *Violent crimes, Property crimes, Other Criminal Code offences, Young Offender Act (YOA) offences, Drug-related offences, and Other federal statute offences*), this increase was most evident in three specific categories: the

YOA offences,¹ *Other Criminal Code offences*,² and *Violent crimes*.³ Under the *YOA offences* category, cases against females increased from 21 per cent to 25 per cent in the same period. Cases against females involving *Other Criminal Code offences* rose from 21 per cent to 26 per cent while the *Violent Crimes* category increased from 18 per cent to 22 per cent. Within the *Violent crimes* category, the most notable increases for females were recorded for offences, such as murder, all types of assault (except aggravated assault), robbery, and kidnapping/hostage taking. This overall reported increase in female youth violence was the subject of this research study.

Since the issue of youth violence and supposedly growing rates of female adolescent violence has been capturing public attention, it was an opportune time to hear from young women about their experiences of violence, either as perpetrators, or as victims, or as both. I believed that it was important to gather the stories of young women who had been identified as violent (by themselves or others) to understand better the contours of their lives and to add a subjective dimension to the current statistics.

For nearly a century, researchers have been concerned about youth crime and delinquency. Initially, much of the theory and research on violent crime and delinquency has tended to focus on the behaviour of males. Violence and delinquency was much less common among young women and was seen to be almost exclusively a male problem. Recent scholarly research attempted to

¹ Offences under the YOA category include failure to comply with a court disposition or undertaking, contempt against youth court, inducing/assisting a young person, and interfering with a performance of terms of sentence.

² Other criminal code offences include prostitution, weapons offences, and failure to appear in court.

³ Violent crime offences include homicide, assault, sexual assault and robbery. Violent offences involve the use of threatened use of violence against a person. Robbery is considered a violent offence because unlike other theft offences, it involves the use of threat of violence.

describe ways in which violence and aggression among young women varies from that of males. As well, many of the studies that do exist on young women who use violence have increasingly focused on their role in gangs (Campbell, 1991; Chesney-Lind, 1997; Hagedorn & Devitt, 1999). In spite of the attention given to this issue, there were some surprising gaps in the available knowledge. A significant, and unexpected, omission was studies on young women who use violence. Furthermore, our knowledge was limited with respect to the extent and nature of their violent and aggressive experiences, both as perpetrators and as victims. And even less was known about the circumstances of their lives and how they explain their use of violence. Thus, the intent of this research study was to address this gap in knowledge in the existing body of literature and to stimulate critical thinking about young women's participation in violence.

The Present Study

The purpose of the study was to gather information from a sample of young women on their experiences of violence, both as perpetrators and as victims, in their daily lives. I undertook a small-scale exploratory study to examine young women's perceptions of being identified as violent (by themselves or others) and to explore their use of violence. The study objective was to add young women's voices and experiences to the literature and the current discourse on this social phenomenon, as it exists today in Ottawa, Ontario.

The research took place with young women aged twelve to twenty years, living in the Ottawa area. Young women were chosen for this study because

youth court statistics showed a slight increased participation in violent crime in recent years for this population (Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, 1998, 2000; Carrington, 1999). Staff at a local youth-serving agency was asked to refer young women who had a known history of violent and aggressive behaviour and to obtain permission for their participation in the study.

The criterion used to select participants was young women that engaged in violence. For this study, the term "violence" was defined as the use of physical force against a person with the intent of hurting or injuring that person. It could or could not involve the use of a weapon. As was mentioned earlier, young women who use violence have been virtually ignored in the literature. It was not necessary that participants have prior convictions of assault under the *Young Offender Act*.

The present study was conducted with a purposive, non-representative sample of ten young women, involving face-to face, in-depth interviews. A qualitative approach was employed to gather information on young women's perceptions of being identified (by themselves or others) as violent and to explore how they became involved in violence and how they made sense of their participation.

The design of this study differed from previous reports on youth violence in several regards. First, young women were targets of investigation rather than male youth. Second, young women's self-reports of their attitudes and violent behaviours constituted the data, rather than reports from parents, police, or professionals. In addition, young women's personal accounts of their use of violence were used in the search for an understanding of female crime and

delinquency. Thus, it was young women's perceptions that were of interest to this study, rather than a more "objective" analysis, such as what might have been provided through quantitative studies.

Research Questions

The analyses was designed to answer the following three research questions:

- ♦ What are young women's perceptions of being identified (by themselves or others) as violent?
- ♦ How do young women explain their use of violence?
- ♦ What is the social and economic context of young women's lives?

Rationale for the Study

At this point, it is important that I provide the reader with my reasons for undertaking this research. I initially became interested in the topic of youth violence in 1998, while doing my social work practicum at the Ottawa-Carleton Regional Police Service. The number of violent crime reports committed by youth that were filed astonished me, although the offenders were mostly males. Incidents included attempted murder, aggravated assault, assault with a weapon, assault causing bodily harm, possession of a weapon, and destruction of property.

My interest was heightened further in 1999 when I went to work as a Youth Probation Officer with the City of Calgary, Alberta. A significant number of young women I met were charged with or convicted of assault, or other forms of violent crime. This made me wonder about the social and economic conditions of these young women's lives that led to such events. Most of the young women

I met came from impoverished backgrounds and families with a high prevalence of marital discord, parental alcoholism, and family violence. Very few had finished high school, and still fewer had any training for the job market. Some were addicted to alcohol or drugs or to both. A majority of the young women had been victims of physical or sexual abuse during their lives.

It became clear to me that the vast majority of social workers, including myself, know very little about young women who enter the criminal justice system as offenders. I also discovered that very few programs and services with a feminist philosophy exist in Canada for female young offenders. Because of these findings, I felt a greater understanding by all who come into contact with young women who use violence was essential to developing public understanding and academic theory, as well as supports and programs relevant to the reality of these young women's lives.

For these reasons, I was stimulated by the need to know more about this subject and to listen to the voices of young women who were identified (by themselves or others) as violent. I wanted to use their stories as a point of departure for reviewing and evaluating current (male dominated) theories to explain crime and delinquency. I suspected that since many of the theories are written from a male perspective and judged according to a male standard, ways of thinking would have to be developed to offer constructive approaches to the problems that young women who use violence encounter.

Organization of the Thesis

This thesis is organized in the following fashion. First to be presented is the introduction, which gives a brief description of the current study, outlines the research questions, and discusses my rationale for conducting this research.

Chapter 2 summarizes the crime and delinquency literature as it relates to youth, in order to inform the reader of the ways in which the issue of young women's use of violence has thus far been understood.

Chapter 3 presents the conceptual framework that guided this research study. In brief, my theorizing is based on socialist feminism, which incorporates an analysis of the structural features, such as capitalism, patriarchy, and racism, which impinge on young women's lives and everyday experiences.

Chapter 4 describes the research methodology, sample selection, measures used, and the strengths and limitations of the study. It also explains the procedures for data collection and administration and describes how the data was analyzed.

Chapters 5, 6, 7, and 8 present and discuss the results of the research. Specifically, Chapter 5 provides the reader with demographic information and an individual description of each of the participants. The greater part of the chapter investigates the everyday life experiences of ten young women who use violence and looks at their offence histories and experiences with school, families, abuse and victimization, peers, alcohol and other drugs, as well as suicidal ideations and self-harming behaviours.

Chapter 6 explores the situational contexts, which surround the young women's use of violence. It describes their motivations and emotional responses

to the violence. In addition, it examines elements of planning, use of force or weapons, and whether such impediments as drugs and money played a part in the events. It also looks at young women's perceptions of being identified (by themselves or others) as violent and the impact that their actions have had on them. Finally, it concludes with the young women's moral judgments around the use of violence.

Chapter 7 describes turning points in the young women's lives that influenced their decisions to move away from violence. In addition, it explores the economic and structural circumstances that shape the lives of the young women and their families and attempts to understand how the erosion of the social welfare state impacts the area of youth violence among young women. It also discusses how female youth violence can be significantly reduced through the adoption of a socialist feminist framework.

Chapter 8 notes several important implications for social workers and social work practice. In particular, the young women offer advice to other women in similar circumstances and outline ways that social workers and helping professionals can better respond to this population. To this, the writer puts forward several initiatives that are effective alternatives to addressing young women's use of violence and is central to reducing structured inequality in society. Next, the young women make suggestions for gender-specific services and programs. As a final point, the writer offers personal reflections given what the young women's accounts have revealed and the current economic situation of our society.

Finally, Chapter 9, which concludes this thesis, provides a summary and analyzes the findings described in the preceding chapters. Having outlined the structure and scope of this research study, let us look at the available literature on female crime and delinquency.

CHAPTER 2

The Social Construction of Female Crime and Delinquency

This chapter briefly examines the existing research on the extent and nature as well as theoretical explanations concerning female crime and delinquency, and places our understanding about this issue in the social context of the 21st century. It is acknowledged that, relative to the literature regarding male youth and violence, the literature on females is limited. The absence of research on young women and violence will be a theme revisited throughout this literature review. Notwithstanding the limited literature, our reading of what is available provides a basis for serious discussion regarding the unique needs of young women and violent behaviour.

The Extent of Female Crime

To understand and to respond to young women who use violence, it is necessary to examine patterns of crime and trends in youth justice. According to the Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics (1998), there were 121,122 youth charged with a criminal offence in 1997, of which 78 per cent were males and 22 per cent were females. This is compared to 84 percent of males and 16 per cent females charged in 1987, reflecting a narrowing of the gap between the two sexes over time.

Overall, the crime rate for both male and female youth has been decreasing in recent years, although the downtrend for males has been much more significant. The 1997 male rate of 751 per 10,000 population declined 27 per cent from a peak of 1,022 in 1991. The trend rate in female criminality has been fluctuating over the last number of years. The 1997 female rate

of 227 per 10,000 population was down 8 per cent from the high point of 248 reached in 1992. Statistics indicate that between 1991 and 1997 the crime rate for males dropped 27 per cent, while the rate for females fell 7 per cent (Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, 1998).

The difference in trends for male and female youth crime is more evident when analyzed over a longer period of time. For example, the charge rate for males was 7 per cent lower in 1997 when compared to 1987 figures. For females, however, the 1997 charge rate jumped 38 per cent from the previous ten-year figure (Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, 1998).

When examining the crime rates of youth, it is important to understand that statistics are produced in a historical context. Before the Young Offender Act (YOA) was introduced in 1984, and even today in some provinces, such as Quebec, police exercise significant discretion by cautioning, reprimanding, and letting go the majority of male and female youth usually apprehended for illegal activities, thereby avoiding court appearances and costs (Carrington, 1999).

With the implementation of the Young Offender Act (YOA), however, this brought changes in upper age limits and a legal redefinition of sixteen and seventeen year olds as "young persons," along with changes in police discretion and court charging patterns (Carrington, 1999; Leonard, Smandych, & Brickey, 1996). According to Carrington (1999), police increased their charge rates during the 1990s so that nearly 60 per cent of young persons apprehended by police are charged and brought to youth courts, even for minor offences, such as shoplifting. The proportion of cases resulting in a conviction varied considerably from one province to another. These variations can in part be

explained by differences in charging practices. While official statistics often suggest that youth crime rates are increasing, perhaps it is only reporting by citizens and detection by police officers that have increased.

While these official court statistics do not measure the full extent of female youth crime, they are indicators of how the Canadian youth justice system responds to some of the illegal behaviours of certain young women. If various indicators are used and drawn from several sources over a number of years and presented within a comparative context, then official statistics can provide important clues to how Canadians react to young women and their crimes.

The Nature of Female Crime

According to police data, the peak age for young women's involvement in criminal activity is more likely to be fourteen to fifteen years of age. In 1997, 22 per cent of female youth were twelve to thirteen years of age, 43 per cent were fourteen and fifteen years of age, and 35 per cent were sixteen and seventeen years old. These results suggest that female crime activity begins to decline at around sixteen years old (Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, 1998).

Unlike the overall trends, there has been an upward spiral in the rates of female youth charged with violent offences over the past decade (Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, 1998). While the rate for female youth is lower than the rate for males, in 1997, the proportion of females charged with a violent crime was 47 per 10,000 population. This represented a 179 per cent increase from 1987 (Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, 1998). A wide range of

offences is included under the rubric of the *Violent crime* category, ranging in seriousness from homicide to minor assault. It is important to note that when examining trends in crime when rates are low, small changes in the rate can translate into substantial changes in percentage terms.

Much of the increase in violent crime can be explained by the rise in common assault charges. In 1997, the rate for female youth charged with common assault increased significantly from 11 to 31 per 10,000 population from the 1987 level (Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, 1998). The increase in the rate may reflect more aggressive "zero tolerance" strategies on the part of police, schools and other authorities (Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, 1998). Other notable increases in charge rates during the same period can be seen in major assaults (133 per cent), robbery (417 per cent), and other assaults (127 per cent) (Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, 1998).

Within the *Property crimes* category, the rate of female youth charged with property offences peaked in 1991 and has been gradually falling since then. In 1997, the rate of 111 per 10,000 population was virtually the same as in 1987 (Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, 1998). Property crimes account for more female arrests than any other type of violation of the law. Compared to male youth, females had proportionately more cases of breaking and entering, taking a vehicle without consent, false pretences, possession of stolen property, and mischief or damage offences (Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, 2000).

"Other offences" include *Other Criminal Code offences* and *Other federal statute offences*. These two categories saw the rate of females charged increase 84 per cent from the 1987 rate of 37 per 10,000 to 68 per

10,000 population in 1997. Mischief charges are partly responsible for these results (Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, 1998). In addition, the proportion of cases against female youth increased substantially with regard to failure to appear in court. The rate in 1997 was 20 per 10,000 population, an increase of 227 per cent since 1987 (Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, 1998). Finally, within the *Drug-related offences* category, there was an upward trend in charge rates for female youth. In 1997, the rate was 6 per 10,000 population, an increase of 50 per cent since 1987 (Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, 1998).

A brief glance at these statistics might suggest an explosion of female crime. But, whether there are increases or decreases in patterns or trends in crime depend to a certain degree on what information is presented for what years and for which provinces. For example, these statistics suggest an increase in the numbers and rates of violent crimes by young women. However, one problem with the data is that the category of *Violent crime* suggests frightening acts of terror or injury to a person, but very few offences of violent crime are like this. It should also be noted that most of these violent incidents do not involve the use of knives or firearms. Official statistics on violent crime can be misleading because they include minor assault charges for pushing, slapping, punching, and face-to-face verbal threats, along with the more aggravated assaults with deadly weapons and murder.

Doob and Sprott (1998) found that there was a slight increase in the charge rates for minor assault crimes. However, there were no changes in charge rates for more serious aggravated assaults or murder attempts, which

remain at the annual low rate of 4 per 100,000 population of Canadian young women under age eighteen. Contrariwise, some studies on the more common types of violent behaviours of young women illustrate that they shout, push, shove, pull hair, and occasionally punch their friends following alleged name-calling or slander (Artz, 1998; Cain, 1989). These authors put young women and their violent behaviour into a context of social interactions. Also, given that most schools have adopted a "zero tolerance" policy, this has resulted in schoolyard aggression, such as uttering threats or minor assaults, being identified by social control authorities as violence and brought to the attention of police. Youth behaviour that might have been ignored in the past now results in an assault charge being laid and a systematic recording of its occurrence.

What is clear is that *Violent crime* is a catch-all category that conceals a multitude of different acts across different contexts. These contexts form the basis for explanations and intervention strategies. Therefore, violence at the most primary level is a statistical and organizational artifact that reflects the work of social control authorities, such as the police and courts, who have the authority to classify certain types of activities as violent in response to shifting societal norms and values (Carrington, 1999; G. A. J. deMontigny, personal communication, November 23, 2000). Considering these factors, we should not be speaking of these young women as "violent women" or "violent youth" because it limits our prospects of arriving at a fuller understanding of young women's use of violence and imposes a false unity to their behaviour.

As numbers tell only part of the story, we now turn to the theories of crime and delinquency that have long speculated on the cause of delinquent behaviour in young women.

Explaining Female Crime and Delinquency

Explanations of female crime and delinquency are various, diverse, and often contradictory. Although it is beyond the scope of this research study to review fully all the various theories, several perspectives will be discussed. I will conclude with feminist theory and the gender debate, in hope that I will bring us a better understanding of what leads young women to engage in violence.

Early explanations for origins of crime and delinquency in the late 19th century were biological and attempted to link the causes of crime to heredity disorders. This approach first emerged with the work of Cesare Lombroso, an Italian physician and psychiatrist. The explanations of female criminality advanced by Lombroso are premised on the view that all criminal behaviour is biologically determined and that criminals are a product of atavism or “biological throwbacks” to more primitive times when people were deemed to be “savages” (Artz, 1998; Boritch, 1997; Flowers, 1990; Shoemaker, 1996). It is felt that there are certain biological differences between men (i.e. aggressive, independent) and women (i.e. passive, dependent) that are seen as playing a determining role in both men and women’s behaviours. According to Lombroso, females are by their very nature less disposed to crime than males and that if women did choose to become criminals; it was largely because they did not possess a maternal instinct (Artz, 1998; Boritch, 1997). Despite these flaws, Lombroso’s work actually set the tone for much of the later work on female crime and delinquency.

In the early 20th century, biological theories were complemented by psychological approaches to delinquent behaviour. These theories, in contrast to biological approaches, are heterogeneous or of other origin in the explanations they offer for youth crime and delinquency. Psychological theories attribute crime and delinquency to a variety of mental, emotional, and personality disorders. The earliest versions of this work were those of Sigmund Freud, who viewed females as biologically inferior to males (Flowers, 1990). According to Freud, delinquent behaviour is the result of tensions between an individual's basic drives (i.e. id, ego, superego) and a lack of intimate and trusting relationships in early childhood (Flowers, 1990). Thus, crime results when the individual fails to learn and to develop adequate measures and self-control through which unconscious drives can be channeled into socially acceptable acts (Flowers, 1990). A major criticism of psychoanalytic theories is that they cannot be tested empirically. Modern psychiatry has largely abandoned Freud's proposals in regard to crime.

This analysis led other theorists, such as Dollard, Doob, Miller, Mowrer, and Sears, to posit the frustration-aggression hypothesis (White & Kowalski, 1994). This theory focuses on individual behaviour without taking into consideration social context. Another criticism is that the major theoretical models reflecting this approach have been developed to explain men's behaviour and assumes that women are less prone to frustration or anger, therefore less aggressive (White & Kowalski, 1994).

It was not until the 1950s that sociologists began to develop explanations of crime and delinquency that emphasized a variety of social and economic

factors, in contrast to the previous biological and psychological theories of crime and delinquency that seek to explain criminality in terms of individual abnormalities or flaws. Early sociological explanations of crime and delinquency primarily focused on working-class male delinquency, often neglecting to offer any explanations of female delinquency. Primary theories of sociological crime and delinquency fall into three major perspectives: social control, strain, and cultural transmission.

Social control theories of delinquency are most often equated with self-concept research and social control mechanisms, such as family and school experiences. Social control theorists posit that all individuals have the capacity to engage in crime and delinquency, but fear, social constraints, and internalized social values keep most people as law-abiding citizens. Control theorists are concerned with the social institutions that produce internal or external conditions that are favourable to breaking the law, rather than the individual's motivation to deviate from the norm (Artz, 1998; Flowers, 1990). They offer explanations from personal controls, such as positive self-concept (Reckless, 1961; Reiss, 1951), to the lack of effective family and other external controls (Nye, 1958), to the absence or presence of an effective social bond (Hirschi, 1969).

Travis Hirschi (1969), in his book on *Causes of Delinquency*, argues "delinquent acts result when an individual's bond to society is weak or broken" and suggests that individuals who exhibit strong bonds or ties to social institutions, such as the family or school, and who believe they should conform to social convention, will have lower rates of law violation (p. 16).

Hirschi tested this theory by analyzing self-report survey data of a sample of young men and young women. However, without explanation, he excluded the young women's responses from his statistical analyses and concentrated his study on males. Since these theories do not consider the gendered nature of crime, they are unable to explain the experiences of young women or why males engage in more crime and more serious types of crimes than females. Nor do social control theories consider the social-structural causes of delinquency.

Strain theorists, such as Merton and Cloward and Ohlin, shifted the focus slightly in their attempts to explain behaviour of working-class males, especially delinquent gang members, by focusing on their lack of socially approved opportunities.

Building on Emile Durkheim's (1933) notion of "anomie,"⁴ Merton (1938) postulates that delinquency arises when an individual's culturally defined goals for economic success are blocked because of limited employment opportunities or lack of educational attainment.

Cloward and Ohlin (1960) built on these concepts in their differential opportunity theory, a more structural approach to delinquency, which looks at how people are unequal in society. In their book titled *Delinquency and Opportunity*, the authors argue that there exists a delinquent opportunity structure as well as a legitimate opportunity structure. They propose that delinquency results from a systemic exclusion of working-class youth from legitimate economic opportunities that lead to success, and that the specific

⁴ Chesney-Lind and Shelden (1998) describe "anomie" as a "breakdown in moral ties, rules, customs, laws and the like that occurs in the wake of rapid social change" (p. 83).

nature of this delinquency is dependent on the characteristics of the neighbourhoods in which the youth live. Consequently, frustrated youth rebel against established authority by developing a subculture that fosters values legitimizing delinquent activities. Within this context, the theory proposes that the culture, goals, and opportunities of working-class youth are significantly different from those of middle-class youth. Quite apart from the fact that it does not address female crime, this theory fails to provide an adequate explanation of why the delinquency originally develops.

Cultural transmission theorists, such as Edwin Sutherland (1939), regard delinquency as learned behaviour through close association with friends who engage in delinquent behaviour. More specifically, the learning of criminal behaviour includes learning the techniques of committing crime and the specific motives and attitudes conducive to crime. For Sutherland, criminal behaviour is learned in exactly the same way as conforming behaviour. Thus, a person resorts to criminal behaviour "because of an excess of definitions favorable to violation of law over definitions unfavorable to violation of law" (Sutherland & Cressey, 1978, p. 75).

Akers (1985) developed the social learning theory, also referred to as reinforcement theory, which specifically isolates social factors from environmental factors that affect individuals. This theory claims that people learn by listening to people and events unfolding around them. The social learning perspective maintains that behaviour is learned on a system of positive and negative reinforcement. Akers proposes that youth learn to commit delinquent behaviour through social interaction with friends who constitute their primary

source of interaction. While theories of differential association and social learning have included women in their theorizing, a major criticism of these theories is the contention that criminal behaviour is learned and its inability to explain the nature of the learning process.

Labelling theory, unlike other cultural transmission theories, concerns itself primarily with the social construction of certain behaviours as deviant, rather than with original causes of delinquent behaviour. Howard Becker (1963), one of the early labelling theorists, refers to labelers as "moral entrepreneurs":

Social groups create deviance by making rules whose infractions constitute deviance, and by applying those rules to particular people and labeling them as outsiders. From this point of view, deviance is not a quality of the act a person commits, but rather a consequence of the application by others of rules and sanctions to an "offender." The deviant is one whom the label has successfully been applied; deviant behavior is behavior that people so label. (p. 9)

From this point of view, then, deviance is not characterized by certain behaviours. Rather, it is the consequence of assigning the label of deviance and its differential application by those who control social power, such as the police, courts, and lawmakers.

Labelling theorist Schur (1971) addresses three problem areas concerning deviance: collective rulemaking and defining deviance, organizational processing of deviance, and interpersonal relations and the impact of negative labelling and how it can affect an individual's self-concept and possibly perpetuate, rather than deter, deviant behaviour (pp. 37-39).

Schur (1979) states that people from working-class backgrounds tend to have the least power to resist stigmatizing labels. On the contrary, people with

social power are much more able to “avoid initial identification as a deviator, ... to avoid or reduce stigma even after being so identified,” and to “influence the outcome in the course of official ‘processing’ ” (p. 276).

Labelling theories opened up the area of analysis of how deviance was defined and processed by social control agencies and how conformity to social rules and norms was secured. Yet, they neglected to consider gender and the issue of social control within a broader analysis of social structure. An understanding of social structures offers a more complex analysis of why certain behaviours are criminalized by the state while others are not, and how a capitalist economic system itself is capable of generating certain patterns of crime (Beime & Messerschmidt, 1991).

In their book titled *The New Criminology*, Taylor, Walton, and Young (1973) attempt to bring together such Marxist principles with the insights gained from interactionism and labelling. They attempt to synthesize an interactional approach to deviance by focusing on its meaning for the individuals involved with a structural approach grounded in the analysis of political economy, class relations, and state practices. They stress the need for a sense of particular historical periods in the kind of explanations offered for crime, deviance, and control. The authors also argue that, above all, a “full social theory of deviance must, by its nature, break entirely with correctionalism” (p. 281) and include the connections between: the wider origins of the deviant act; the immediate origins of the deviant act; the actual act; the immediate origins of social reaction; the wider origins of deviant reaction; the outcome of

social reaction on the deviant's further action; and the nature of the deviant process as a whole (pp. 270-278).

As criminal behaviour is always problematic within the framework of social arrangements, *The New Criminology* was an attempt to develop the parameters of an adequate criminological theory and to promote a form of radical politics. While Taylor, Walton, and Young convincingly argue that structural inequalities and divisions in material production and ownership are intrinsically related to the social factors producing crime and delinquency, they failed to include women in their comprehensive critique.

Considering Gender

The theories of crime and delinquency discussed so far have focused on male delinquency. The issues of gender and crime and women and crime are noticeably absent from much of the discourse until the 1970s, and, if explained at all, it is with reference to biological difference. Female crime and delinquency has been largely perceived as insignificant, given women's under-representation in the official crime statistics. On the contrary, male delinquency is accounted for with reference to a host of factors, but very rarely with reference to men's gendered position. This exposure of male criminality, however, marked the starting point of feminist attempts to find alternative ways of conceptualizing female crime and delinquency.

The development of what has become known as feminist theories has also contributed to a greater understanding of female crime and delinquency. Daly and Chesney-Lind (1988) define feminism as "a set of theories about

women's oppression *and* a set of strategies for change" [emphasis in original] (p. 502).

The evolution of feminist approaches to analyses of gender and crime progressed in two important stages. The initial thrust was to critically evaluate past biological and psychological theory-based explanations of female crime and delinquency and corresponding practices in the criminal justice system. The result was to show how they offered negative and misleading stereotypes and sexist views of women. One major concern was to demonstrate how these attitudes were reinforced by social control authorities, such as the police and courts, through their discriminatory treatment of female offenders (Carlen & Worrall, 1987).

The second significant phase in the development of feminist perspectives on gender and crime was to demonstrate that mainstream explanations of delinquency, with the omission of any consideration of gender, had limited relevance when applied to women. Feminists argue that mainstream explanations of crime and delinquency are dominated by the male construct of society and biased against female experiences (Daly & Chesney-Lind, 1988; Leonard, 1982; Morris, 1987; Naffine, 1987). Therefore, attempting to insert women into such methodologies and theories leaves the gendered nature of violence unproblematic and masculine presumptions largely unquestioned (Chesney-Lind, 1989).

Contemporary feminist research has contributed to our understanding of women and their experiences in a way that is not simply in contrast to men's. A number of feminist theories have attempted to explain the cause of crime,

gender differences in the crime rate, and the exploitation of female victims from a feminist perspective. Those most often discussed in the literature are liberal feminism, radical feminism, Marxist feminism, and socialist feminism. These perspectives share the core assumptions that intersections of gender, class, race, ethnicity, power, and social context shape all human relationships along gendered lines through a social process, and that this process must be understood before change can be effected. What distinguishes these feminist approaches from one another are the competing conceptions of the origins of gender inequality, the mechanisms by which gender inequality is institutionalized, and the divergent strategies proposed for eradicating gender inequality (Daly & Chesney-Lind, 1988).

A socialist feminist framework will guide this research project. Such a framework suggests that female delinquency is gender stratified and that women's crime must be understood in terms of the status of women's relative economic, social, and political powerlessness in a patriarchal society (Carlen, 1988; Messerschmidt, 1986). Equally important are the ways in which social control agencies, such as the police and courts, act to reinforce a woman's place in a predominantly male society. Social control authorities have considerable discretion in labelling or choosing not to identify particular behaviour as violent. This relationship between violent behaviour and the official response to that behaviour is particularly critical when the question of female crime and delinquency is considered in this research study. In my view, socialist feminist theory on the gendered nature of young women's crime offers the best hope for understanding young women's violent behaviour and delinquency.

Young Women, Violent Behaviour, and Gang Membership

In deciding how to best address the research questions in this study, the academic literature on violence offered little direction. Violence by young men has been extensively considered and an emerging body of work emphasizes the gendered nature of violence and centrality of masculinities in understanding violence (Connell, 1987; Messerschmidt, 1986, 1993). So, where does this leave violence by young women?

Generally, women's ability to behave in ways that can be classified as violent has been largely ignored or downplayed in the literature (White & Kowalski, 1994). Indeed, for the most part, the pattern of silence has been set by the male-centeredness of research inquiries into violence (Chesney-Lind, 1997). Unfortunately, the shortsightedness of these approaches has contributed to the absence of any sustained research on young women's use of violence.

With some notable exceptions (Bottcher, 1986; Campbell 1986; Chesney-Lind & Koroki, 1985; Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 1998), very few studies have been done on young women's pathways to violence, and even less work on the contexts of violent behaviour and its connections with other areas of their lives. While these studies do not focus directly on young women's use of violence, they do deal with young women's accounts of their own experience and shed some light on a much under-studied topic. In this regard, they contribute to the qualitative basis for understanding female delinquency with their personal accounts. Notwithstanding, there is one study (Artz, 1998) that does at least contribute to the literature on violence from the perspectives of young women

between the ages of thirteen and sixteen. Therefore, Artz's research was considered important to the population that participated in this project.

Several factors that appear to foster young women's delinquent and violent behaviour include physical and sexual victimization, negative attitudes toward school, lack of academic success, perceived lack of opportunities, social activities that involve risk, low self-esteem, and traditional beliefs about women's roles.

Specifically, Chesney-Lind and Koroki (1985) interviewed ten young women in custody in Hawaii about a number of dimensions of their lives. The ethnicity of the group was highly diverse; all but one of the young women were members of one or more non-white groups. The young women all reported severe family problems, such as poverty, divorce, death of a parent, abandonment, alcoholism, social isolation, frequent experiences of family violence, and physical and sexual victimization. They reported feeling suicidal, and in some cases had made suicide attempts. School life was also problematic, in that all the young women had skipped school and had been placed on school detention or probation at some time or another. In addition, the authors highlighted the young women's traditional notions of sex and gender role expectations for the future as a contributing factor. In addition, most of the young women were experienced users of alcohol and other drugs and most had been involved in delinquent behaviour for some time before they were detained in custody. According to the authors, the young women preferred the "bad girl" image because it afforded them popularity, status, excitement, and a sense of pride.

In a study of ten African American and Hispanic young women who were incarcerated for more serious offenses in California, Bottcher (1986) identified three aspects of their lives that propelled them toward delinquency. The life accounts of these young women revealed independence at an early age, extensive free time with little structure from their parents, and an inadvertent drift into violence and criminal behaviour. For some of the young women, the circumstances of their lives were so grim, with home life characterized by poverty, abandonment, violence in the family, and alcoholism, that they had no choice but to leave or else they were asked to leave.

The research of Campbell (1986) focused on a sample of 364 British girls and women selected from schools (251), a youth custody centre (60), and an open prison (53) in which they described their experiences with, attitudes toward, and perceived limitations of aggressive behaviour. The author found that a high proportion of the girls and women had been involved in a physical fight within the last year, primarily against another female over issues of jealousy, personal integrity, or loyalty to a friend. The majority of the fights resulted in minor injuries and no lasting animosity.

In reflecting further upon Chesney-Lind and Koroki's (1985) earlier study, Chesney-Lind and Shelden (1998) suggested that these young women resorted to delinquency as an adaptive measure in order to cope with their dismal life situations. The young women's home environments were highly unstable and great degrees of family violence and abuse and neglect of children characterized family life. The authors pointed out that oftentimes young women, particularly working-class young women from families characterized by parental alcoholism,

family violence, and child abuse are disadvantaged early in life by limited educational opportunities, entrenched stereotypical working-class notions of masculinity and femininity, the constraints of the sexual double standard, and by the devastating impact of physical and sexual abuse.

Studies, such as that by Artz (1998), contribute greatly to our understanding of the various factors that come into play when young women are violent. Artz's Canadian study of six white, middle-class young women who use violence and who were not part of a visible minority group or involved in the criminal justice system, provided detailed accounts of troubled and violent families, parental alcoholism, frequent abuses, internalized notions of women's low social status, as well as poor performance and problems with discipline in school. The young women, in attempting to cope with the violence and silence, learned that power and control in the family resided in the use of physical force. The author hypothesized that the message of survival equates with dominating the weaker members of the group and guided them in their relationships outside the home and allowed the young women to rationalize their violent actions.

In fact, Artz (1998) argued that young women's use of violence toward other young women is grounded in the idea of "horizontal" violence (pp. 178-179). This means that members of oppressed or powerless groups, such as the young women living in homes with dominating and abusive males, view similarly situated young women through their oppressor's eyes and mirror the oppressor's behaviours by internalizing them. Thus, in hoping to gain some measure of power, they fight other young women. While the young woman may feel powerful momentarily, the feeling is short-lived as it does little to change her

status. On the contrary, it perpetuates a cycle of retaliation. As Artz found, young women who use violence reported higher rates of physical and sexual victimization and attacks by groups of peers than young women who did not use violence.

A further source of information is the growing literature on bullying. A recent study by Banks (2000) found that young people who bully often come "from homes where physical punishment is used, where children are taught to strike back physically as a way to handle problems, and where parental involvement and warmth are frequently lacking" (p. 12). Other studies on bullying suggest a "gender gap" in threatening behaviour. For example, Smith and Sharp (1994) found that when young women bully they are more likely than young men to use verbal threats and other non-physical types of behaviour. Crick (1996) found that young women tend to engage in relational aggression by hurting others through damaging or manipulating their relationships in aversive ways, such as spreading vicious rumours, social exclusion, or withdrawing friendships. Still, other studies, conducted in gender-separate schools, suggest that bullying by young women is similar to bullying by young men and "the range and level of physical violence can be as horrific and frightening as in an all boys-school" (Keise, 1992, p. 53).

Most studies of bullying use adult conceptions of what constitutes violence and its effects. Few studies attempt to understand the meaning of violence from the viewpoint of young women. One body of research in the United States that has attempted to do so has focused on girl gang membership and violent behaviour.

Historically, the gang phenomenon and its association with youth violence has been described and understood as essentially a male problem. And, where females have been considered, many of the studies (Cloward & Ohlin, 1960; Thrasher, 1927; Yablonsky, 1967) tend to downgrade the role of young women to that of auxiliaries, if they are involved in gang activity at all (Campbell, 1991; Chesney-Lind, Shelden, & Joe, 1996; Moore, 1991). During the second wave of research on gangs in the 1950s and 1960s when there were few all female gangs, young women were often described either as sex objects, who instigated fights between rival gangs, or tomboys (Campbell, 1991).

More contemporary qualitative work on female gangs, however, has moved beyond stereotypical notions about these groups, as simply auxiliaries of male gangs, to more careful assessments of their lives (Campbell, 1984a, 1991; Chesney-Lind, 1993; Moore, 1991). These ethnographies document the reasons why young women join gangs, including social-structural and economic factors, weak social bonds to family and school, physical and sexual victimization, social isolation, and peer group influence (Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 1998). Of particular significance is that many of these gangs provide young women with skills to survive in their bleak communities, while also allowing them to escape temporarily from a dismal future that most often awaits them (Campbell, 1990).

In this context, a number of researchers have attributed the presence of youth gangs and delinquent behaviour (regardless of gender) to the urban underclass of lower class communities (Hagedorn, 1988; Moore, 1991; Vigil, 1988). Individuals living in inner city communities have been subjected to

major structural economic changes, which have resulted in a lack of educational and occupational opportunities and lives of poverty with very few opportunities. Vigil (1988) and Moore's (1991) ethnographies of Chicano gangs in East Los Angeles revealed how changing economic circumstances and street socialization take on increased importance and have a significant impact on young men and young women. Vigil (1988) postulated that both male and female gang members experience multiple marginalities because they live in poverty-stricken neighbourhoods and are consequently affected by the pressures of marginal economics and identities. Vigil argued that both males and females who are looking for status and recognition adopted a subculture and, therefore, engaged in violent behaviour, as well as alcohol and other drug use, which are an integral part of gang life.

These findings are amplified by Fishman's (1995) re-evaluation of her earlier study of thirty African American female gang members known as the Vice Queens. This gang was a female auxiliary gang to a male gang, the Vice Kings, which existed in Chicago during the early 1960s. The young women lived in a low-income community characterized by poverty, unemployment, deterioration, and a high crime rate. Failing in school and unable to find work, the majority of their time was spent "hanging out" in the streets with the Vice Kings, which usually included the consumption of alcohol, sexual activities, and occasional delinquency, such as shoplifting, prostitution, and running away. They also engaged in physical fights with other groups of young women, mainly to protect attacks on their integrity and their gang's reputation for toughness. Fishman concluded in her analysis that the young women in this study used their

participation within this gang “as a means to acquire some knowledge of such adaptive strategies as ... fighting in order to be prepared to survive as independent adult women within their community” (pp. 26-27). Fishman's bleak depiction about the situation of these young women's lives in impoverished neighbourhoods has been largely confirmed by contemporary research by Campbell (1984b, 1991), that finds much the same pattern.

The social context within which young women join gangs, specifically poverty level backgrounds, cannot be ignored, particularly what it means to be a woman growing up in such an environment. Campbell's (1984b, 1991) research on three females (two women and one adolescent) involved in three separate African American and Hispanic female gangs in the New York area found similar patterns of young women in this culture. The author suggested that women become gang members as an adaptive solution to difficult life circumstances, such as chronic poverty, marginalization, and unemployment. Campbell (1990) believed the women in the study held contradictory middle-class values and faced major problems, including “subordination to the man in the house” and “the powerlessness of underclass membership” (pp. 172-173). Thus, their lives had come to reflect all the burdens brought on by the challenges of gender, class, and race. Campbell suggested that these women became gang members because it served a social function, in that, it provided them with a sense of belonging, acceptance, and safety. Moreover, the women engaged in violence in an effort to survive and a way to prove to them that they are capable of fighting and to establish their reputation with other members. Having a reputation provided the women with protection from neighbourhood violence and gave them

a sense of worth and power. The women also participated in violence to settle arguments arising from domestic or romantic disputes between partners. Thus, within such a context, it is easy to understand how women can be attracted to a gang and how gang membership can form part of their social lives.

The socio-cultural and environmental contexts of behaviour must also be considered when attempting to explain the relationship between gender and violent and aggressive behaviour. In Baskin and Sommers (1993) study of females' initiation into crime and delinquency, the authors found that women who engaged in violent street crime were likely to live in "distressed communities,"⁵ characterized by high concentrations of poverty, stranger victimization, use of alcohol and other drugs, and association with peers involved in delinquent behaviour. "Community levels of family dysfunction, economic and social dislocation, as well as the presence of illegitimate opportunity structures provided the landscape for the lifestyles and routine activities that were related to the women's participation in violent street crime" (Baskin & Sommers, 1998, p. 126).

According to Baskin and Sommers (1993), life histories of females arrested for violent crimes in New York revealed a background of violent experiences – at home, in school, and on the streets. They indicated that by the age of ten, the majority of women they interviewed were involved in street fights during their tenure at school and associated with peers who were violent. The authors suggested that this chain of events leading to violent behaviour and crime was a reinforcement of earlier experiences with siblings and other family

⁵ Distressed communities are neighbourhoods, which suffer from severe poverty and are distinguished by their intensified economic and social dislocation. Most families had few network resources and little social capital to facilitate investment in their children, therefore lacking real stakes in conformity to conventional society.

members. Similar to males, women's motivation for assault was the need for respect and honour.

In summarizing these studies, it is unclear what role gang membership plays in violence by young women. As was noted earlier, prior research on gangs and violent behaviour has tended to focus on the behaviour of males and there are few studies of females. Review of the literature has indicated a lack of consensus on the relationship between gender, gang membership and violent behaviour. Nevertheless, the ethnographies summarized here clearly establish the multifaceted nature of young women's experiences in gangs. Furthermore, an examination of the life experiences of these young women attests to the ways in which gang membership facilitates survival in their harsh environments. Finally, focusing on the social role of the gang in young women's lives illustrates the ways in which their experiences of neighbourhood, family, and violence interact.

In conclusion, these studies suggest that the young women's economic and social marginalization is an explanation for their participation in criminal activities and/or gang life, and the violence that accompanies it. Missing in the literature are studies that actually allow young women on the margins to speak about their experiences of violence, both as perpetrators and as victims, in their daily lives. Therefore, this research study attempted to address this gap by gathering data from young women's interviews on their perceptions of being identified (by themselves or others) as violent, their explanations for engaging in violence, and the social and economic contexts of their lives. Thus, listening to the young women's stories was an essential component of this research, and

was particularly important to understanding what leads them to engage in violence.

CHAPTER 3

Conceptual Framework

This research study was inspired by a socialist feminist analysis of female crime and delinquency. Socialist feminism, as an approach or mode of analysis, differs from other perspectives in the way in which it conceptualizes issues, frames questions, and interprets results. What distinguishes social feminism from other feminist work on women is that it focuses on class, gender, and racial relations of domination, in which sexuality (including reproduction) and labour (paid and unpaid) are linked (Daly & Chesney-Lind, 1988). It differs from other feminist perspectives in that both class and gender relations are viewed as primary.

Daly and Chesney-Lind (1988) have identified five main elements of feminist thought that distinguish it from other types of theories that downplay gender and feminism:

- ♦ Gender is not a natural fact but a complex social, historical and cultural product; it is related to, but not simply derived from, biological sex differences and reproductive capacities.
- ♦ Gender and gender relations order social life and social institutions in fundamental ways.
- ♦ Gender relations and constructs of masculinity and femininity are not symmetrical but are based on an organizing principle of men's superiority and social and political-economic dominance over women.
- ♦ Systems of knowledge reflect men's views of the natural and social world; the production of knowledge is gendered.
- ♦ Women should be at the center of intellectual inquiry, not peripheral, invisible, or appendages to men. (p. 504)

While these themes emphasize the centrality of gender and gender relations in understanding social phenomena, such as women's use of violence and the classification of certain behaviours as violent, they fail to consider the intersection of class, race, and ethnicity in women's lives.

Generally, feminist theories have made an important contribution to our understanding of female crime. Within the varying perspectives, however, feminist scholars have differed in their emphasis on class and gender. For example, Oakley, Millett, Radosh, and Rowbotham have varied in their theorizing of the importance of class and gender, with Messerschmidt extending the analysis to include race and ethnicity.

Liberal feminists, such as Ann Oakley, center their analyses of gender inequality on a sex role perspective. Oakley (1972) notes how role theory may be used to explain different crime rates for men and women. She argues that because of women's sex role socialization in the family, school, media, and state, they are subject to more forms of social control. This protection and supervision of women and their socialization to be passive, dependent, and restrained highlights the way in which females are supposedly less predisposed to criminal activity. Such an approach challenges traditional notions of sex roles as natural and reveals how gender differences are socially constructed. It also shows how criminality (aggression) and masculinity (status achievement) may be linked because of the sorts of acts associated with each. As Oakley concludes, "the dividing line between what is masculine and what is criminal may at times be a thin one" (p. 72).

Oakley and liberal feminism at least acknowledge gender inequality and the social dimensions of behaviour, namely, that gendered behaviour is learned through interaction in an unequal culture. While this approach concentrates on the differences between men and women, it does not explain why a considerable number of women do commit crime, if their socialization into conformity is as effective as assumed. Furthermore, Oakley ignores the fact that males, according to their class, race, age, and particular social situation, construct masculinity differently. The differences in the construction of masculinity among males are important to understanding the nature and extent of crime among men. For these reasons, the liberal feminism approach is unsuitable as a framework for this research study. In order to understand what impels young women to engage in violence and crime, we need to incorporate social structure and gendered power in our analyses.

Radical feminists, such as Kate Millett and Susan Griffin, view masculine power and privilege, that is, patriarchy, as the root cause of all forms of inequality. Patriarchy is primary while all other social relations, such as class and race, derive from relations between men and women. According to Millett (1970), patriarchy is a universal phenomenon and most avenues of power within contemporary society are seen as under the control of men. Millett focuses on the social forces that shape women's lives and experiences in order to explain female crime and delinquency. She argues that crime is intimately related to structures of masculine power and privilege.

For Griffin (1971), the power attributed to men is realized in the physical and sexual victimization of girls and women and often condoned by the state. In Griffin's classic piece, *Rape: The All-American Crime*, she states that rape is not so much a problem of male deviance as a problem of dominant notions of acceptable masculinity. According to the author, much of criminality (and the subjugation of women) can be accounted for as a problem of patriarchal society, which encourages aggression for men and passivity for women.

While radical feminism has moved sexuality and gendered power to the forefront of feminist thought, this approach uncritically builds its theoretical framework upon the assumption that gender is exclusively dichotomous, that is, men are aggressive and women are passive. Moreover, it is critiqued for its essentialism and reductionism because of the assumption that all women are universally subjugated to male power within the monolith of patriarchy. Furthermore, it imputes a single and unitary male personality (Messerschmidt, 1993).

Unlike the liberal and radical theorists, socialist and Marxist authors shift the focus to social structures to consider patriarchy and capitalism. Socialist feminists, such as Sheila Rowbotham, attempt to synthesize Marxist analyses of class and capitalism and radical feminists' analysis of patriarchy to focus on the structured domination and oppression of women by men, without class or gender prevailing over the other. Rowbotham (1973) posits that in patriarchal societies, men control important policies and decisions affecting both men and women. She maintains that they also physically control the lives and decisions of women

in interpersonal relationships. The author claims that it is the interaction of these relations that structures female crime and delinquency in our society at any given time. Similarly, while Polly Radosh (1993) recognizes gender relations and patriarchal structure in her feminist analyses, she sees them as rooted in class relations of production. Historically, these class relations have created and used gender differences to control and subordinate women. The author focuses on the negative impact of capitalism on male-female relationships and the pressures on women to resort to criminal behaviour in an attempt to gain greater control of their lives relative to males.

Rejecting much of radical feminism and aspiring to incorporate socialist feminist insights into Marxist criminology, Messerschmidt (1986) attempts to synthesize certain aspects of both perspectives into a criminology theory that prioritizes neither capitalism nor patriarchy. Messerschmidt argues that both class and gender shape an individual's life experiences. Just as class experiences differ, so do the social experiences of men and women. It is this differing social experience that shapes and limits the lives of both men and women and influences how they perceive the world and act upon it.

Building upon his earlier socialist feminist work (see Messerschmidt, 1986), Messerschmidt (1993) applies the structured action theory to the social construction of masculinities and youth crime. The author posits that different forms of male youth crime are formed by various interpretations of masculinity generated by their position in class, gender, and racial divisions of labour and power. Crime is said to provide a means of "doing

masculinity" when other resources are unavailable (p. 88). To comprehend the relationship between masculinity and crime, Messerschmidt states that we must concurrently understand when behaviour typically thought to be masculine, such as interpersonal violence, is not a resource for constructing masculinity.

As such, through an examination of "girls in the gang," Messerschmidt (1997) argues that the gang provides a milieu within which young women can escape the bounds of prescribed femininities. Young women use the resources available to construct not masculinity but a specific type of femininity and challenge notions of gender as merely difference. The author states that conceptualizing gender in terms of social situation and structured action permits a deeper formulation of what previously has been considered atypical "masculine" behaviour, such as female violence. In addition, Messerschmidt asserts that conceptualizing gender in these terms provides us with a more critical account of masculinities, femininities, and crime.

Messerschmidt's theory (1986) is one of the first accounts of crime and delinquency to examine how gender intersects with class and race. His theory is also relevant to the Canadian context. For example, Aboriginal women are more likely than females of the dominant culture to spend time in the prison systems. In 1991, close to one-quarter of the inmate population of Kingston Prison for Women in Ontario was Aboriginal, although Aboriginal women comprised less than 2 per cent of Canada's population (LaPrairie, 1993). Consequently, it is not surprising that most aboriginal women view the Canadian criminal justice system as racist.

Chesney-Lind (1997) extends this argument by saying that young women are victims of "multiple marginality" because their class, gender, and race have placed them at the economic periphery of society (p. 4). The author alleges that to be identified a delinquent takes place in a world "where gender still shapes the lives of young people in very powerful ways. This means that gender matters in girls' lives and that the way gender works varies by the community and the culture into which the girl is born" (p. 121). Chesney-Lind also points out that the social context of this world is not fair to young women, especially to those of colour or those from working-class backgrounds (p. 133). Clearly, feminist criminology, particularly that informed by socialist feminism's concern for how class, gender, race, and ethnicity are deeply embedded in all social groups and societal institutions, offers a great deal to the study of female crime and delinquency.

Socialist feminist theory was important to this study for a number of reasons. It establishes the interconnectedness of social relations and provides the framework for moving beyond a one-dimensional perception to what Joan Kelly (1979) calls a "double vision" (p. 220). From such a perspective, our personal, social, and historical experience is shaped both by class and gender relations, "relations that are systematically bound to each other – and always have been so bound" (p. 220). To understand young women's involvement in crime and delinquency, we must consider simultaneously patriarchy and capitalism and their effects on their behaviour. In addition, from a socialist feminist perspective, power, in terms of class, gender and race, is central for

understanding the more serious forms of violent crime that young women commit.

Socialist feminists contend that general theories of delinquency originally developed to explain male criminality cannot be adapted to explain female crime as they reflect a bias toward male experiences and activities. Moreover, women commit crimes under different circumstances and for different reasons than men (Carlen, 1988; Messerschmidt, 1986). Socialist feminist theory focuses on women's subordinate status in a patriarchal society. Specifically, it considers factors in women's lives, such as class, gender, race, ethnicity, and issues pertaining to social control and the perpetuation of powerlessness of women in society (Carlen, 1988; Messerschmidt, 1986). Socialist feminists argue that theories of crime and delinquency "must explore the total lives of women, and there are no tools within existing criminological theories to do this" (Cain, 1990, p. 10). A significant reason for this shift away from mainstream theories of crime and delinquency is the belief that working within a traditional framework will not provide any insights to central questions about young women's use of violence nor lessen their oppression in society.

Consequently, this research study attempted to examine young women's perceptions of being identified as violent and their use of violence in the context of their social and economic environments. More specifically, the focus was on:

- ♦ the impact that people, the community, and institutions have upon the young women;
- ♦ parental and sibling influences through their family experiences;
- ♦ peer group associations; and
- ♦ their interactions with social control authorities, such as the police and courts.

Many feminists view this process of examination of social control issues as "ultimately the best way to understand women and crime" (Heidesohn, 1985, p. 197).

CHAPTER 4

The What, Where, When, Why, and Who of Research

As research theories are important in shaping studies, I consider briefly the feminist approach and how it was important to this research. The second section of this chapter discusses the research design. The methodology described therein formed the basis for sample selection, data collection and administration, measures used in the study, and data analysis procedures. Dissemination of research findings and the strengths and limitations of the study are presented in the final two sections.

A Feminist Approach to the Research

A feminist approach to research informed this study and operated under several important principles and beliefs, which included an examination of power differentials and gender imbalances. First and foremost, feminist research assumes that the nature of what we do is never apolitical or value-free; therefore, it is essential that the researcher declare her biases and beliefs (Maguire, 1987). In addition, I acknowledged and considered the structural context within which social relations exist (Maguire, 1987). Furthermore, I sought to explore issues of power and gender, as social relations are structured and influenced directly by these factors (Maguire, 1987). In this way, I acknowledged and attempted to reduce inequitable power relations, which are often inherent in traditional approaches to research.

Feminist research also emphasizes that knowledge obtained in the process should emerge from women's experiences, as this would permit a practical and emancipating application of the results (Maguire, 1987). This is because the knowledge one acquires through everyday experiences is highly

valued and the researcher is not assumed to be the "expert." Consequently, I made every effort to respect the young women, and not to treat them as objects and things. I also attempted to use a methodology that would draw upon their everyday experiences, without alienating or dehumanizing them. As a result, I employed several different methodological strategies and practices, rather than a strict adherence to the positivist method.

Another important principle in feminist research is accountability to women (Maguire, 1987). This means that women's experiences must serve as a basis for our research. To be accountable to the young women in this study, I had to evaluate my research in relation to what I knew about their lives and experiences. Accountability also required that I identify and understand the structural forces that could adversely affect my research, and to resist those forces. In this regard, it is accountability that makes our research uniquely feminist and true to women's experiences.

Finally, feminist principles strongly advocate that research should be transformative (Maguire, 1987). That is, research should not simply document the existing situation; rather, it should be designed to lead toward positive future change.

Given this understanding, it is my objective to add my voice to the feminist discourse and literature in hopes of influencing social work practice with young women who use violence in ways that will result in improved support and additional services and programs for this population. For these reasons, the design of this study was directly informed and shaped by my feminist orientation.

Research Design

This research study focuses on young women who were involved in violent crime. This study is an ethnographic analysis of young women's

perceptions of being identified (by themselves or others) as violent and their use of violence. It documents the young women's interactions with their family, peers, community, and the institutions that serve them. A qualitative approach to the research, based on both self-report responses and personal narratives to a semi-structured interview, was chosen because such a methodology attempts to understand peoples' experiences from the perspectives of those who experience them (Yegidis & Weinbach, 1996). Thus, a qualitative approach allowed for a rich data set for studying attitudes and behaviours of young women who engage in violence.

Sample Selection

The population of this study was defined as young women who ranged in age from twelve to twenty years of age, who resided in the Ottawa, Ontario area, and who engaged in violent and aggressive behaviour. The fact that there was little literature that addressed young women's participation in violence helped me to choose the focus of my work. I limited my interviews to ten young women, as I wanted to do in-depth work with them. The young women chosen to participate in the study represented the membership of a cross-section of young women who engaged in violence and came from a variety of cultural backgrounds. Unfortunately, I was not able to recruit any young women between the ages of twelve and fifteen years, who met the criteria for this study.

Participants for the study were young women who used the services of the Young Women's Emergency Shelter and Besserer Street Drop-In of the Youth Services Bureau. The Youth Services Bureau is a community-based non-profit social service agency, which offers support to high needs, high risk, low-income youth age twelve to twenty years. It provides a number of services to youth including: employment counselling, residences, an observation and detention

unit, individual, family and group counselling, drop in, and outreach services. The agency also provides gender-specific anger management groups for young men and young women, who want to address their inappropriate expression of anger.

I used a non-probability sample to select participants for the study, specifically a purposive non-representative sample design (Mertens, 1998). A purposive sample was appropriate because it allowed me to interview young women who were identified (by themselves or others) as violent. Thus, I was able to select young women with the goal of identifying information-rich cases, which enabled me to examine each of their circumstances in-depth. In addition, I maintain that a purposive sample was best suited to the requirements of studying young women who use violence because of the small sample size and the depth of information sought from each young woman. No adequate estimates of the proportion of young women who engaged in violence existed. Furthermore, there were no lists of young women who use violence that could be used to draw a sample. Under these circumstances, this type of sampling procedure was appropriate based on gaining some insights into young women's experiences in such behaviour.

Data Collection and Administration

Interviews with the young women took place during the period mid-January to mid-March 2001. Posters (refer to Appendix A) inviting young women to participate in the research study were placed at the Young Women's Emergency Shelter and Besserer Street Drop-In of the Youth Services Bureau. The poster included details of the research, what was involved, and the name of a contact person. Young women who expressed an interest in participating in the study were given a letter of introduction (refer to Appendix B) by staff, which

outlined the objectives of the research study and the participant's rights. They were told that participation was voluntary and that their anonymity was guaranteed. The young women were informed that the interview would last approximately two hours and that each participant would be paid a stipend of \$20 for an interview. In the end, however, the interviews were only ninety minutes in duration.

In addition, the limitations of confidentiality were described. The young women were advised that any information received was confidential unless they were to indicate during the interview unreported child abuse or neglect, disclosures of life-threatening criminal acts (for which they had not been apprehended), or suicidal behaviour. Provincial child welfare legislation stipulates that any professional having suspicion of child abuse or neglect involving children or youth under sixteen years of age must report their suspicions at once to the local child welfare authority. I relied upon the Youth Services Bureau policy and procedures for dealing with any potential disclosure by participants of perpetration of life threatening criminal activity.⁶ The young women were advised that if they had committed such an act (and had not been caught), and chose to disclose it to the researcher, the researcher was obligated to inform the Youth Services Bureau worker who would contact the police after securing the young woman a lawyer. Finally, all young women were advised that if the researcher assessed them to be at high risk for attempting suicide, she would ask the Youth Services Bureau worker to bring in appropriate resources to prevent this from happening.

The young women were also assured that participation (or lack thereof) in the research study would not affect their status as a client of the Youth Services

⁶ The Youth Services Bureau has a specific policy on this issue called "Client Disclosures of the Perpetration of Life-Threatening Criminal Activity."

Bureau. Then, the young women were given the researcher's name and telephone number to call, if they were interested in receiving additional information or in participating. Once contact was made with the researcher, a mutually convenient date and time and an appropriate meeting place were arranged for the interview.

Interviews were conducted in the local library or a private office in the agency. Each interview started with a letter of consent (refer to Appendix C), which was reviewed in the young women's presence. I also informed each young woman of my legal obligation to report any child abuse or neglect, perpetration of life-threatening criminal activity, and suicidal behaviour. The risk I took in being direct with the young women about the limitations of confidentiality was that it might discourage them from talking about their use of violence or from participating in the study altogether. In the end, this proved not to be an issue, as all the young women agreed to participate. Furthermore, I was not required to report any such acts or threats to authorities, as none had been disclosed. Finally, the young women were asked to sign the consent letter indicating their voluntary cooperation.

Next, I explained to each young woman the purpose of my research. Specifically, I said that I wanted to hear of her perceptions of being identified as violent so that I could formulate an understanding of what leads young women to engage in violence and how they make sense of their participation. At that time, I assigned each young woman an alphabetic pseudonym for the study in order to protect her identity. Names commencing with the letters A to J were chosen, representing ten interviews. After the administrative details had been taken care of, a semi-structured interview was administered.

Each young woman was free to break off or end the interview at any point without consequences, retreat for a time, ask questions, respond to questions, and to share or not to share particular experiences. The interview was audio recorded with the young woman's consent. Any requests to shut the tape recorder off were respected. I explained that I wanted to audio record our conversations so that I had each young woman's story in her own words, and so that I could listen to what she had to say instead of writing things down. All ten of the young women agreed to be tape-recorded and soon disattended that a tape machine was being used. I stressed that staff at the Young Women's Emergency Shelter, Besserer Street Drop-In, Youth Services Bureau, and Carleton University would not have access to the tapes and that the only person to hear them would be myself, whose job it was to transcribe them. The young women were told that following transcriptions their audiotapes would be destroyed, after the information had been used in the study for which it was intended.

In addition, the young women were informed that when the study was written up their anonymity would be assured. Specifically, they were told that under no circumstances would their names or identifying characteristics be included in the report or any documentation. Following each interview, the young women were given an opportunity to ask questions about female adolescent violence. At that time, the young women were provided with telephone numbers to contact the researcher or the thesis supervisor if they had additional comments to make. The name and telephone number of the chairperson of the Ethics Review Committee was also provided as an avenue for complaints. Finally, the young women were informed that on-site staff at the Young Women's Emergency Shelter and Besserer Street Drop-In would be available to help them

deal with any issues arising out of the interview. None of the young women voiced any concerns regarding the methodology or research topic.

For their involvement in the research study, the young women each received \$20 immediately following their interviews, regardless of whether they answered all the questions or completed the interview. At the same time, they were given a "thank you" card, which I thought was important. Both the incentive and the gesture of appreciation were deemed to be helpful for the success of this study. Finally, the young women were offered a copy of the results of the research study. The young women were asked to indicate their interest in obtaining a copy on the letter of consent by circling "yes" or "no" and providing an address or telephone number for those requesting a copy.

Ethics

Prior to commencing the interviews, the research proposal, poster, letter of introduction, letter of consent, and the interview guide were sent to Carleton University Ethics Review Committee in December 2000 for a certificate of ethical approval. This was done to ensure respect of the integrity and safety of the participants, and was encouraged even where the research constituted external professional activity.

Measures

Two considerations guided the development of the interview guide. First, there was a need to keep it as short as possible, but, at the same time, cover a wide range of factors. Second, brief standardized measures for most of the constructs of interest that were suitable for participants in this age range were of little help. Thus, an interview guide was developed for most of the factors of interest.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted using an interview guide (refer to Appendix D). To tap into the social worlds of the young women, I used both closed and open-ended questions directed at their perceptions of being identified (by themselves or others) as violent, their use of violence, contributing factors to violence, family history of violence, and recommendations for programs, services, and/or support. By addressing these focal points, I hoped to construct a context in which their salient life experiences could be “thickly described” (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). At the same time, the structure would enable us to appreciate better the circumstances that contributed to their participation in violence.

The open-ended method created a context in which the young women were able to speak freely and in their own words. Furthermore, it facilitated the pursuit of issues that were raised by the young women during the interviews, but was not recognized by the researcher beforehand. The in-depth approach also allowed the researcher flexibility to pursue information about specific life events and to determine the appropriateness of exploring others in greater depth, as well as to provide an opportunity for the young women to reflect upon those events. As a result, the researcher was able to gain insight into the young women’s attitudes, feelings, and other subjective orientations to their experiences

Data Analysis Procedures

All interviews with the young women were audio recorded with their permission and transcribed verbatim. The transcriptions, audiotapes, and field notes were stored within separate files in a locked file cabinet accessible only to the researcher. The transcriptions, audiotapes, and field notes did not include any names or identifying characteristics. Instead, an alphabetic pseudonym was

assigned to each young woman's audiotapes and transcriptions in an effort to preserve anonymity.

The basic pattern for the management and analysis of data was adapted from Glaser and Strauss' (1967) grounded theory analysis method, sometimes referred to as the constant comparative method of analysis. However, I modified the approach to include two important components of research: intersubjectivity and an examination of the social reality. Kirby and McKenna (1989) define intersubjectivity as "an authentic dialogue between all participants in the research process in which all are respected as equally knowing subjects" (p. 129). The authors recommend giving voices to research participants from the margins, and including a critical reflection of the social context and reality in which their experiences have occurred throughout the analysis. The inclusion of these two components was important to this research study in two ways. First, it ensured that I was able to hear and affirm the words and experiences of the young women. Second, it allowed me to critically reflect on the social structures, which influenced the actualities of their lives.

The steps for qualitative data analysis that I sequenced are described. I began the process by reading all the transcriptions from the young women's interviews at once. I noted personal reflections or other comments in the margins. Next, I prepared the data for analysis. To do this, the data were divided into segments that were manageable in preparation for coding and cross-referencing, before they were placed in individual file folders. Each segment of data was identified in such a way that it could be quickly and easily relocated within its home context. Next, I broke down the data into specific and general patterns, closely examined data items, and compared them for similarities and differences until sections that represented a phenomenon could

be identified. Different themes, patterns, commonalities, and differences were grouped together according to the constant comparative method. The themes that I identified were then coded and placed with similar groups of data within category file folders. Categories that emerged from the data were then woven into analytical themes.

The goal of data analysis was to find common themes in the transcriptions from the young women's interviews and to find language that captured these themes. Analysis consisted of moving data from one category to another (constant comparative), and looking for what was common and uncommon (variations) within and between categories. As the analysis moved forward, the data were arranged and rearranged until patterns began to emerge from the comparisons. While this was not a flawless procedure, it was systematic. The next step involved bringing all categories together and trying to identify where the links existed between them. The continuous process of comparison and linking of themes, explanations, and meanings until patterns emerged helped me to understand young women's perceptions of being identified as violent and their experiences of violence, both as perpetrators and victims, in their daily lives. Finally, a description of the research results was written.

These procedures formed the initial bases of the collecting and analyses of data for the present research study. This methodological process was consistent with other qualitative studies on similar populations (Silverman, 1993).

Dissemination of Research Findings

Copies of the final report were given to the Young Women's Emergency Shelter, Besserer Street Drop-In, and Youth Services Bureau. Participants were also offered a copy of the results of the final research report. In addition, a copy of the report was placed in the MacOdrum Library at Carleton University and a

copy was given to Dr. Colleen Lundy, Thesis Supervisor and Director of the School of Social Work. Finally, copies of the final research report were distributed to agencies and groups seeking information on young women and violent behaviour. The research findings will also be submitted as an article to a scholarly journal for publication.

Strengths and Limitations of the Study

An important contribution of this study was that it employed qualitative data collection involving in-depth interviews, which were transcribed verbatim. A qualitative approach allowed the researcher "to document the world from the point of view of the people studied" (Hammersley, 1992, p. 165). Thus, I was in a position to explain links between young women's perceptions of being identified (by themselves or others) as violent and their violent behaviour using their personal narratives.

A second major strength of this study was the concurrent assessment of the different types of experiences of violence, such as witnessing, victimization, and perpetration, the numerous acts of violence, and the number of different agents, such as parents, siblings, peers, and strangers.

As with any research study, there were certain limitations related to the research methodology. The primary limitation was based upon the procedure of self-report, as part of the interview process. While use of self-report measures is a common technique in social sciences research, self-report data are limited by a number of biases (Flowers, 1990). First and most obviously, they depend on the willingness of participants to reveal their "criminality" to the researcher. The actual prevalence of the young women's behaviours may have been different than what they reported. Second, external validity is limited. The young women were a unique sample of young women who used violence. Therefore, care

should be taken in generalizing these results to other groups. Finally, use of self-report measures mean that there may be errors of memory and that those errors could have impacted on the honesty and accuracy of the young women's responses.

A second limitation of self-reports that was considered when analyzing the interview data was the "truth status" of the young women's narratives (Silverman, 1993; Totten, 2000; in press). Although there were no reasons to question the validity of the young women's experiences of violence, some of the young women may have had a public image to maintain. Thus, segments of their experiences may have been somewhat self-serving, and, in certain instances, fictitious. The focus of this study, however, was to examine young women's perceptions of being identified (by themselves or others) as violent and to explore their use of violence. The accounts of their experiences and perceptions were the data. Whether the young women accurately recalled life events was not a significant issue for me. I was more concerned with the accounts the young women used to describe their lives and experiences and what they considered to be the salient life events that led them to engage in violence. Notwithstanding, this methodological process was representative of other qualitative studies on similar populations (Silverman, 1993; Totten, 2000, in press).

Another noteworthy limitation of self-reports was the possibility that the young women may have tried to minimize their involvement in crime or the violent acts they may have perpetrated. The propensity to trivialize their use of violence may have been to preserve their self-image or to support a certain favourable or unfavourable version of events. Furthermore, there was the

possibility that the young women may have tried to co-opt the researcher into subscribing to their explanation of events.

A final limitation of self-reports was the possibility that the young women may have blocked from their memory aspects of their experiences of violence. While certain details are easily brought out, the more traumatic or incriminating acts may have been lost to memory. Prompting may have helped to bring the memories forward again, however, it also may have led to a situation where the young women may have fabricated stories with the aim to impress the researcher. Or, perhaps, the young women may have introduced a change of topic to avoid answering certain questions.

Despite these inherent shortcomings, however, it was possible to examine young women's perceptions of being identified (by themselves or others) as violent and to explore their experiences of violence, both as perpetrators and victims, as measured here. It is hoped that the findings of this research will be considered one piece of a puzzle to be combined with other studies carried out on similar populations.

CHAPTER 5

A Passage to Violent Behaviour

Many children and youth from supportive and emotionally connected families incur some difficulties with their family members, schools, and peers. In order to overcome their problems, however, they have relied on relationships of love and safety provided by their families, friends, neighbours, or institutions, such as schools. Moreover, they have been able to pursue productive futures, which include higher education, gainful employment, challenges, and respect.

Unfortunately, the young women interviewed in this research study were deprived of certain prosocial activities and protective factors found in many mainstream families, communities, and schools. Overall, the young women grew up in communities, often characterized by violence and relatively high incidences of crime. Their schools found it difficult to keep them interested in academic pursuits and out of harm's way. Their unstable families were often wrought with family violence, physical and sexual abuse, as well as parental alcoholism and drug addiction. Consequently, the young women interviewed were deprived of a nurturing and loving childhood and a safe home environment in which to grow and make constructive decisions about their lives. As a result, the choices and decisions they made were frequently determined by what they were exposed to within their families and community environments.

This chapter imparts to the reader the accounts of the experiences of ten young women whose violent behaviour had come to the attention of professionals and authorities. The young women describe their experiences in

their schools, in their families, with their peers, with alcohol and other drugs, and their initiation into violent offending. Before that, however, basic demographic information and a brief description of each participant are offered to introduce the reader to the young women individually.

Demographic Information

The youngest member of the sample was sixteen years old and the oldest was nineteen. The median age of the participants was seventeen and one-half years. The ethnicity of the group was predominantly white; with one young woman identifying as Native and another as part Native and part Black. Seven of the young women had dropped out of high school, typically leaving school by the ninth or tenth grade. Two young women had returned to school and were in the process of completing their high school. Only one young woman had graduated with a grade twelve education.

The overwhelming majority of these young women came from troubled and disrupted homes and had experienced serious difficulties in life. Only three young women had lived with both of their biological parents for part of their lives. Yet, three other young women had been placed in foster homes or residential settings, with one young woman experiencing nineteen foster care placements. All the young women had lived in emergency shelters and/or on the streets at one point or another in their lives, with one young woman moving to the streets at age eleven. Nine of the young women were receiving or applying for social assistance. One young woman was working in an unskilled job as a janitor.

Meet the Participants

Participant 1: Allison. Allison is eighteen years old and lives on her own in an apartment that she shares with three street youth. Notwithstanding Allison's commanding presence, due primarily to her height and physical characteristics and deep voice, she appeared to be a very compassionate and caring individual. She dropped out of high school after completing grade ten. In her school and her community of Hamilton, Ontario, Allison's friends and acquaintances saw her as "tough" because of her size, which was intimidating to most of her cohorts. Allison lived on the streets from age eleven until sixteen years. To survive, she became a debt collector for drugs. She subsequently moved to Ottawa, Ontario one year ago, where she attended drug rehabilitation for two months. Allison was estranged from her family and three siblings and only recently established contact with her mother and stepfather.

Participant 2: Brenda. Brenda is seventeen years old. She is a very effervescent, talkative young woman, who is always willing to offer her opinions and personal experiences. Just days before the interview, Brenda was expelled from school (grade nine) for non-attendance. She was currently looking for employment. At ten years of age, Brenda was asked to leave her father and stepmother's home because she and her stepsister had run away. She went to live with her mother, whom she had not seen in over six years. Adjusting to her new lifestyle was difficult. Brenda started experimenting with drugs and ended up turning to violence. At age fourteen, she found herself living on the streets in Ottawa, Ontario for several years before taking up residence in a group home.

Brenda is now temporarily residing with her mother because she was having difficulty adjusting to the rules of the group home.

Participant 3: Carol. Carol is a diminutive, dark-haired seventeen year old young woman. In addition, she is a vociferous and self-assertive individual. Carol seems determined to extricate herself from her previous self-destructive ways. She became involved with drugs at an early age, dropped out of school at age thirteen, and went to live on the streets of Ottawa, Ontario. Eventually, she was picked up by the police and placed in a group home by child welfare authorities. For the next two years, Carol alternated living between a group home, a shelter, and on the streets of Ottawa and Vancouver, British Columbia. Carol then returned to her parent's home for a short time before entering drug rehabilitation for ten months. Recently, Carol returned to school (grade ten) and is currently living at the YWCA.

Participant 4: Dorothy. Dorothy is a slim sixteen year old young woman of medium height. She is of mixed Native and Black heritage. Although soft spoken, I sensed that Dorothy wanted desperately to share her experiences and to look at alternative lifestyle options. She was expelled from school recently for non-attendance. For the last three years, Dorothy moved from shelter to foster care to group homes. This series of events culminated in Dorothy running away to live on the streets in Ottawa, Ontario at age fifteen and subsequently being confined to a detention centre. When Dorothy was released, she went to live at the YWCA. Just before the interview, Dorothy was asked to leave the YWCA because of a verbal altercation in which she yelled and swore at a staff member.

She is now temporarily residing with her mother, while she looks for another place to live.

Participant 5: Elizabeth. Elizabeth is seventeen years of age and almost four months pregnant. During the interview, Elizabeth's initial reserve belied her determination to be self-sufficient and to provide a good life for her and her child. She dropped out of school part way through grade twelve. After a physical altercation in which she hit her mother, Elizabeth was asked to leave the family home. For seven months, she stayed with different friends, and when that was not possible she lived on the streets. Elizabeth returned home to her mother and common-law partner's place for a brief period of time before moving to a shelter for about four months. At the time of the interview, Elizabeth was temporarily living with her older sister and her children until a group home placement could be found. Elizabeth plans on keeping her child after it is born.

Participant 6: Frances. Frances is eighteen years old and a well-travelled young woman, having made her way across Canada. She appears to be a very optimistic person that likes to see the positive side of situations. During her early teen years, Frances lived with her mother, stepfather, and their two children in the country outside of Ottawa, Ontario. She dropped out of school following grade ten. Frances' mother asked her to leave because she did not get along with her stepfather. Frances decided to travel, where she took up living on the streets of Vancouver, British Columbia. She turned to drugs and crime. Frances returned to Ottawa and continued to live on the streets for four months. She subsequently moved into a one-bedroom apartment with her

father, her brother, and a friend, where she currently resides. At the time of the interview, Frances was looking for employment. Frances has no desire to collect social assistance benefits because she is adamant that she wants to earn her money.

Participant 7: Gabrielle. Gabrielle is eighteen years old. She is an articulate, bright, and personable young woman. Notwithstanding Gabrielle's medical diagnosis as "manic-depressive with an anxiety disorder," she is clearly focused on her educational and career goals. Until age seventeen, Gabrielle had lived at home with her parents, where there were ongoing disagreements between them. However, one such argument erupted into a physical altercation between Gabrielle and her mother, where she punched her mother in the nose. Following the fight, Gabrielle left home and checked herself into a hospital, where she was diagnosed with clinical depression. Following her release from the hospital, Gabrielle moved in with her boyfriend in Ottawa, Ontario, with whom she has been living for the last year. She attends adult high school and is working toward her grade eleven credits. Gabrielle plans on attending university in anticipation of becoming a medical doctor or pathologist. She maintains an amicable relationship with her parents and visits them every Saturday night for dinner.

Participant 8: Heln. Heln is sixteen years old and very tall for her age. She is a soft-spoken young woman and appeared timid at times. Initially, Heln lived in Toronto, Ontario with her parents, one brother, and two sisters. She stopped going to school at age twelve for a period of two years. Heln became

involved with drugs and crime. Because of ongoing arguments with her parents, Hein was placed in a group home in another city for one year. She returned to school and completed her grade nine. Hein subsequently moved to another residential facility closer to home. After a few weeks, she ran from the group home and moved to the streets with her boyfriend, where she lived for four months. After some of her friends were the targets of a number of stabbings, Hein and her boyfriend decided to relocate to Ottawa, Ontario. At the time of the interview, Hein was living in a shelter and looking for employment.

Participant 9: Isabelle. Isabelle is nineteen years old and self-identified as a lesbian. She has an engaging personality coupled with a good sense of humour. Moreover, Isabelle seems committed to changing her environment through volunteering with an agency and providing peer support around the issue of violence prevention. In her early childhood years, Isabelle lived at home with her father, stepmother, eight brothers, and nine sisters in northern Ontario. After Isabelle's parents separated, the older children moved on their own while the younger children were placed in foster care. Isabelle lived in nineteen foster care homes and attended twelve different schools. Notwithstanding this series of unstable events, Isabelle still managed to graduate from school with a grade twelve education. Recently, Isabelle was living with her father and his common-law partner, when she got into a fight with the woman and struck her. Apparently, Isabelle did not agree with the way the woman physically disciplined her children. Consequently, she was asked to leave the family home and has been living at a shelter in Ottawa, Ontario for the past three months.

Participant 10: Janice. Janice is nineteen years of age. She is a pleasant and personable young woman. Janice appears determined to put her familial experiences behind her and to make a comfortable life for herself. Her parents divorced when she was six years old. Janice moved to Ottawa, Ontario with her mother and her younger sister. She completed grade eleven and part of grade twelve. Because of ongoing mother-daughter conflict, Janice moved out on her own at age sixteen. She lived with her boyfriend until he was picked up on a warrant the day before the interview. Janice maintains a relationship with her mother and her sister; however, she has had no contact with her father for the past six years.

In summary, the lives of the young women involved in the study revealed many similarities. Particularly, most of the young women came from distressed families, often characterized by separation, divorce, and abandonment. Most were from lower-income families. Besides, many of the young women have lived with experiences of family violence and parental alcoholism and drug addiction. What is more, many of the young women have had extensive personal experiences with emotional, physical, and sexual abuse. Having lived on the streets with few resources to survive, the young women sought to escape from their problems by trying to create a better life for themselves.

To this end, while the young women considered themselves as perpetrators of violence, they also believed that their stories are an important addition to the current dialogue on young women's participation in violence. Moreover, the young women felt their contributions could benefit social workers

and helping professionals to understand the issue of violence and to be able to provide services and programs to young women who use violence. This would collectively move the helping profession closer to discovering ways to prevent violence. In that regard, the young women and I shared a common goal.

Pathways to Young Women's Crime

Since the focus of this study is young women's violent behaviour, an obvious starting point might be the offences for which the young women have been convicted. In Canada, as elsewhere, there has been increased media attention on the nature of young women's behaviour and their role in crime. By starting with the young women's own accounts of the circumstances, we can better appreciate the complexity of their everyday experiences and perhaps begin to uncover the social basis for their offending behaviours.

Based upon self-report, five of the ten young women advised they had been convicted of a range of offences, although most had been formally arrested for administrative (failure to comply with a disposition) or property crime offences. In addition, two other young women had charges pending. For two of the young women, this was their first offence. The offence categories and descriptions of crime for which the young women have been convicted are presented in Table 1.

The crime category descriptions I used were taken from the Youth Court Survey, which is conducted by the Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics in collaboration with provincial and territorial government departments responsible for youth courts. In descending order of seriousness, starting with the *Violent crime* category, one of the young women had been sentenced for minor assault

and possession of a weapon (knife). Three young women were convicted of *Property crimes* offences (break and enter, possession of stolen property, theft under \$5,000, motor vehicle theft). Two young women were charged with *Other Criminal Code* offences (unlawfully at large) and one young woman for *Young Offender Act (YOA)* offences (failure to comply with a disposition). Two young women had charges pending: one for possession of drugs (mushrooms) and one for trespassing. Notwithstanding their convictions, only two young women had ever spent any time in a detention centre and that was for running away.

TABLE 1
OFFENCES FOR WHICH THE YOUNG WOMEN HAVE BEEN CONVICTED

Description of Crime	Convicted Offences	Outstanding Offences	Percentage
<i>Violent Crime</i>			
Minor assault	1		
Possession of a weapon	1		
Sub-Total	2		14.3%
<i>Property Crime</i>			
Breaking and entering	2		
Taking a vehicle without consent	1		
Theft under \$5,000	1		
Possession of stolen property	1		
Sub-Total	5		35.7%
<i>Other Criminal Code</i>			
Unlawfully at large	3		
Trespassing		(1)	
Sub-Total	3	(1)¹	28.6%
<i>Drug-Related</i>			
Possession of drugs		(1)	
Sub-Total		(1)¹	7.1%
<i>Young Offender Act</i>			
Failure to comply	2		
Sub-Total	2		14.3%
Total	12²	(2)^{1&2}	100%

Note 1: Outstanding offences are in brackets.

Note 2: These numbers are greater than the number of young women (10) since some young women were charged with more than one offence.

As can be seen in Table 1, charges for *Other Criminal Code offences* (unlawfully at large) and *Young Offender Act (YOA) offences* (failure to comply with a disposition) were the most common categories the young women were convicted of. Less frequent were *Property crimes* charges for break and enter, taking a vehicle without consent, theft under \$5,000, and possession of stolen property. Least frequent were *Violent crime* offences (minor assault, possession of a weapon). Non-existent were major serious crimes against people, such as robbery, attempted murder, or homicide.

The young women were upset at being labelled as criminals. While they acknowledge that they did engage in illegal acts, the young women did not consider themselves as “career” criminals. This is because they did not see crime as an important part of their lives. For the most part, their behaviour appeared to be a reaction to the ongoing problems in their everyday lives. Many of the young women commented that difficulties at home and in school and pressures from peers often moved them toward their offences. Allison's story is a good example of this. Physically and sexually abused at home, Allison turned to violence and delinquent behaviour in order to bring attention to her situation.

Most of the physical fights were with me and my step dad. I think that's where I got a lot of my anger and I couldn't take it out on them because they were my parents. So, taking it out on other people became my way of dealing with stuff. (Allison, personal communication, January 20, 2001)

Another young woman, Brenda, who was charged with being unlawfully at large for running away at age thirteen, recalled how she felt like a criminal.

I was on the run from the group home and I didn't have any family [because] I was very angry at them. I didn't understand why they

put me in Children's Aid and the group home.... [One morning] I got to the group home ... then at five o'clock in the morning the cops came and took me and brought me to jail. I stayed there three months because I was on the run for six. And, they [the police] said, "You can't run away anymore ... you have to learn your lesson." (Brenda, personal communication, January 24, 2001)

Brenda did not think of herself as a delinquent or criminal and felt it was unfair to be labelled as such. Likewise, she did not perceive her offence as a crime in itself, but as an act carried out in view of her situation. Thus, a detention centre was not the place for her because the true solution to her offending behaviour lay elsewhere.

What is perhaps surprising is how often young people are charged with administrative non-compliance offences, such as failure to comply with a disposition or being unlawfully at large. Three of the five young women, who were convicted of crimes, were charged with such offences. According to Reitsma-Street and Artz (2000), young women, when arrested, are still much more likely to be arrested for administrative non-compliance offences, such as running away, prostitution, or curfew violations, than for violent crime offences. These charges presently comprise 27.3 per cent of total charges against young women. Chesney-Lind and Sheldon (1998) suggest that young women are arrested disproportionately more (28 per cent) than their male counterparts (11 per cent) for administrative non-compliance offenses because of a tendency to sexualize their offences and an attempt to control their behaviour. This may also reflect a societal assumption that young women need to be protected more than their male counterparts. Thus, while crime and delinquency among young women may have slightly risen overall since the 1970s, the characteristics of

youth arrests have not changed. Clearly, the young women's accounts of administrative non-compliance and property crime charges must raise some questions about the persistent image of widespread crimes of violence that attracts much media attention.

Life in School

Outside of the family, the school is perhaps the most important social institution shaping the lives of young people. This is because school offers its younger generation a route to well-paid employment and rewarding careers. In addition, the school environment provides a venue where young people can interact, thereby influencing their sense of self and individual identities. Baskin and Sommers (1998) reported neighbourhood violence and school experiences were factors influencing young women's involvement in violent behaviour. As a result, I decided to turn to the young women themselves to get a better idea of some of the influences of the school environment and their experiences.

Some of the young women had fond memories of their elementary school days. For example, Carol and Heln described their experiences as "easy" and "fun," while Brenda used the adjective "popular" to describe her early schooldays reputation. Only two young women reported problems in elementary school, particularly because they were victims of bullying.

Bullied as a child because of her weight and stereotyped as a "tough" youngster because of her size, Allison soon found school to be a battlefield not unlike her home.

In elementary school, I always got picked on and teased and called names.... They made fun of me and teased me about the way I looked and the way I acted. It wasn't fun.... I think that's where

most of my anger came [from]. I just let it happen and happen and I kept it inside until one day when I exploded. People found out very fast not to mess with me. (Allison, personal communication, January 20, 2001)

Here, Gabrielle recounts her early school day experiences:

When I was little, people used to walk up to me and they'd extend their arms ... and they'd go, "elephant, elephant, elephant" because of my weight.... [T]hey'd call me all kinds of names through my whole life ... in elementary school. And when I got to, like, grade six and seven were okay. And then around grade eight, I was just referred to as a freak.... [P]eople would alienate me again. And then I'd have to, like, kind of stand up for myself. (Gabrielle, personal communication, February 9, 2001)

Bottcher (1986) found a similar pattern, where she noted that "very few of these women disliked elementary school" (p. 21). The author did observe, however, that once they entered junior high school, the young women began to skip classes, using school only to find friends and start their days.

Secondary school was also problematic for the young women interviewed. Their attitudes and behaviours changed drastically, too, once they reached intermediate and high school levels. The young women used words, such as "rock," "tough girl," "big bad girl," and "the shit" to describe themselves. The themes of being tough and standing up for yourself were repeated a number of times throughout the interviews.

The young women, however, did not attribute their violent behaviour to the negative school experiences, such as boredom, discipline, or poor performance. Nevertheless, during our interviews, it became clear that the school did provide a social milieu in which normal adolescent adjustment issues were played out. It was during this time that the young women tried to establish their own identities

separate from their families and were most vulnerable to peer pressure. Yet, ironically, it was during this time that most of the young women were in need of familial support.

On the contrary, the school was also a venue where aggression and violence received the greatest support by peers in terms of their initiation and continuance. It was also in the school environment that many of the young women met their friends. And, it was with these friends that the young women skipped school, took part in vandalism, engaged in physical fights, consumed alcohol, experimented with drugs, and performed other non-conforming activities. Not surprisingly, most of the young women found school an alienating experience and dropped out by the ninth or tenth grade.

What were the young women doing? All ten of the young women had regularly skipped school and had been placed on school detention or probation. One young woman was involved in school vandalism. Three were involved in physical fights on school premises. In fact, three young women had received suspensions for fighting.

For many of the young women, high school appeared to be a time of struggle as they yearned to be popular and liked by their peers. They recalled how they used violence as a way of trying to fit in and to bring them popularity in high school. The young women were invited to frame their experiences using the definition of violence, as the use of physical force against a person with the intent of hurting or injuring that person. I explained that such events did not have to involve the use of a weapon. Allison explains:

My experience is that when I first started fighting, it was to be cool, to have friends because I never really knew what friends were.... My power was violence and everyone knew that I could beat them up. And, that's how I got my friends. (Allison, personal communication, January 20, 2001)

For Brenda, the pathway was quite similar:

When I first started doing violence that was my reason to hang around with the cool people. You weren't cool if you didn't do drugs or you weren't cool if you didn't beat up people or rob people.... I wanted to be in the cool people gang, I guess. (Brenda, personal communication, January 24, 2001)

For young women like Heln, peers played a more direct role in her initiation into violent offending. Initiation occurred because of a situational pressure to jointly participate in what was primarily viewed as a social behaviour.

Yeah, I've done that, definitely, where I robbed people and stuff. I haven't wanted to but I've done it anyways, just 'cause I was with people. I couldn't just stand aside and not do anything wrong. I'd be, everyone would make fun of me all the time. And then, people would think I wouldn't be able to take care of myself. More people would try to take advantage of you, if they think you are not willing to take care of yourself. (Heln, personal communication, February 11, 2001)

Popularity, as indicated by these narratives, was an extremely salient issue with most of the young women. However, it is important to recognize that, for them, popularity and status were sought through fights, being tough, having attitude, taking drugs, and robbing people. Such patterns were also found among street youth in Campbell (1984b) and Fishman's (1995) studies on young women in gangs.

Notwithstanding, these young women began to spend more time away from school, in unstructured activities with peers, and became more heavily

involved in street life. Consequently, by the age of fourteen or fifteen, the overwhelming majority of these young women had dropped out of school.

Little attention has been paid to analyzing the reasons why young women stay away from school or drop out of school. In this study, seven of the young women in the study dropped out of school before completing grade twelve, some as young as eleven or twelve years of age. The young women's motivations for dropping out of school included objections to particular teachers, teachers in general, specific subjects, or the curriculum as a whole. These factors coupled with their resistance to study made the decision to leave school an easier one. Even so, three of the young women had been expelled for non-attendance.

In many ways, the young women's withdrawal from school was part of a larger process in which social ties to various institutions were being eroded. As their school attendance dropped off, their opportunities for positive socialization were diminished. However, from the young women's accounts, a pattern of violent behaviour was well established before they left school. Carol recounts how she dropped out in seventh grade, but not until after she had established a reputation of fighting.

When I was in elementary school ... I used to really get into trouble. I'd have an attitude problem with teachers. If I didn't like them, I'd let them know, and people, too. I was a bitch, I guess. But then after, like, I graduated elementary school, I went to high school. It was so much different because, like, it wasn't more attitude, it was more like fight.... It was not mouth, it's like you prove yourself. So, I did. Then I left school and I went to the streets.... (Carol, personal communication, January 24, 2001)

Nonetheless, while most of the young women had dropped out of school, they saw dropping out as a fundamentally ambiguous experience with both good

and bad aspects. On the one hand, dropping out was a rational short-term solution to the various problems that they encountered in school. In fact, some saw it as the only option available to them, given the circumstances of their troubled lives. On the other hand, these immediate benefits were more than offset by awareness that their early departure from high school would pose more serious problems in the not-too-distant future.

Many of the young women commented that without a grade twelve education, they faced a bleak future beset by unemployment or low-paying, dead-end jobs. While it would be an exaggeration to say that the young women had been converted to the inherent attractions of schooling, they had come to realize the importance of educational qualifications as a means of improving their life chances. In fact, two of the young women had returned to school despite the harsh social and economic conditions under which they were living. What is more, eight of the young women said that they would like to get more education. Six young women hoped to complete their high school; eight felt that their ideal future would include a college diploma or a university degree.

"My Family is a Broken Up Family"

Families play an important role in the socialization of their children. Although each young woman had her own unique story to tell, most had in common at least one negative family experience, such as the presence of physical and sexual abuse, alcoholism and drug addiction, inadequate parental supervision, family discord, family violence within the home, and criminal involvement of other family members. Stories regarding their personal histories

and relationships with their parents were told with intense emotion and in great detail.

In this section, detailed accounts are provided of the young women's family environment, Children's Aid Societies (CAS) involvement, parental alcoholism and drug addiction, and relationships with their parents. While the issues of family violence and physical and sexual victimization will be touched upon, they will be addressed in greater detail in the next section.

According to the family histories provided by the young women, they were families trying to survive with few resources. Some of their mothers and fathers had been subjected to abuse as children and to the damages of parental alcoholism. Still, other parents came from families that had abandoned them at an early age. One of the fathers spent time during late adolescence raising twelve siblings and surviving by means of hard physical labour. In describing her father, Carol made the following statement:

My dad, he grew up with CAS. His mom left him and twelve kids. She took off one day; she left. My dad had to quit school and work and raise twelve kids, until the CAS finally found them three years later in this one little house with nothing. And, CAS took them all and separated them all. All the kids are separated. And now, my dad only knows, like five. He always hated the CAS, he always has.... When he was a kid, they used to put [him] in foster homes where [he'd] get beaten, whatever, whipped. (Carol, personal communication, January 24, 2001)

Gabrielle recounts her parent's family history that included abandonment, strife, and alcoholism.

On my dad's side, my grandfather, he left my dad or he died, one or other; they don't talk about it. But, he wasn't there since my dad was six. My grandmother on his side was an alcoholic and she had something like seven kids and she was on welfare. And, all the

kids were working. Like, dad didn't finish high school because he had to get a job.... And, on my mom's side, my grandmother got divorced from her first husband and married this military guy. And, this guy had a drinking problem, as well. And, he used to cheat on my grandmother. (Gabrielle, personal communication, February 9, 2001)

Janice described her mother as having been raised in a climate of violence and demonstrating such violence in her present family. Here is Janice's description of her own childhood:

My mom is really violent. She's more physically violent because her father was really physically violent with her and so was her mom. And I guess that could be a part of where I get it as well, but I dunno. Obviously, I was smacked as a kid. Maybe my mom smacked me too hard a couple of times or hit me too hard or pushed me too hard. It wasn't to the point where I was like broken or she broke my arm. I had bruises like every other kid; you know what I mean. (Janice, personal communication, March 11, 2001)

As the young women talked about their childhoods, it became clear that their family backgrounds were very diverse and consisted of a number of different home situations. Most of the young women came from extremely troubled and disrupted home environments. Stories of family violence and child abuse figured prominently. Seven sets of parents had divorced, with some parents incurring subsequent divorces. A mother had abandoned one young woman while three other young women had been abandoned by their fathers in their early childhood years. With three exceptions, Carol, Gabrielle, and Heln's parents have been married from anywhere between eighteen and twenty-six years. This was a source of pride for Carol, who stated, "They're still married. They've been married forever" (Carol, personal communication, January 24, 2001). Of the three families that were still intact, however, one was

said to include an abusive father. No mention was made of their mothers being abusive. In addition, most of the young women reported moving several times – with one parent, then another, and often with relatives, or other extended family members.

For some of us, it is hard to imagine growing up in a household abounding with domestic violence, physical and sexual abuse, an emotionally absent parent, mental health problems, and CAS involvement. However, many of these problems were the norm for most of the young women in the study. Take, for example, Allison's account of her family while growing up:

I don't remember much of my childhood, so it's really hard remembering the times living at home.... I kinda remember bits and pieces, but not a lot.... And, what I do remember are the horror stories, not the good stories.... I have two sisters and a brother. My real father I don't know.... I seen my dad once or twice when I was little. I don't remember much of him. I know he was an alcoholic and he used to beat my mom up.... And, my father stabbed her at one point.... My mom remarried to this guy [who had three kids].... My step dad, he doesn't drink. He's a pretty decent old-fashioned guy. He just came in when he wasn't wanted.... Yep, they married when I was eight. My family is a broken up family. It has been since I can remember.... My mom couldn't handle my brother. My brother had a really bad anger management problem ... so my mom put him in foster care. Since he's been about seven up until he was sixteen, he's been in and out of foster homes. So, he had a pretty rough life.... Yeah, there was actually a lot of abuse going on in my family, between our family and siblings. Yeah, I was sexually abused by my sister, and my uncle, and my stepbrother. There was a lot of sexual abuse going on in the family. It was never spoken of until this day.... And, until this day, my mom still does not know. There are days where I wished I had told her because she could've done something about it. But then, there are days that she probably never even would've believed me.... There has been physical abuse between me and my sisters, and me and my cousins, and my brother. Mental abuse sort of came from my mom. My mom didn't know much of anything, so I guess the mental abuse came from her. She didn't know what was going on inside her, so

whatever was going on with her we had to go through also. And, that was another reason why Children's Aid tried taking us away from my mom. She was there, but she wasn't all there as much as other mothers were. (Allison, personal communication, January 20, 2001)

Isabelle also offered a vivid description of her family life:

I've got eight brothers and nine sisters. They're all my blood brothers and sisters, except two.... But I always considered them my real brother and sister. My parents divorced when I was two.... Like alcohol runs through my family. My real mom was an alcoholic, all the time.... They divorced because one day my dad was coming back from work and here was my real mom putting all of us kids on the door [frame] and we were supposed to hold on. And every time that we fell, she'd smack us, you know, and she'd put us right back up there. She did it to everyone of us on each door. And then when someone would fall, she'd hit us with a belt or a stick or whatever she could find. Or she'd rip out our hair and stuff. She'd hit us with coat hangers or whatever. So they separated because of the abuse. My step mom, she took care of us from when she was fifteen 'cause her mom died and my dad was helping her. And she took care of all of us kids from the age of fifteen. She moved in with us and after a while my dad took off again. They split up and got back together again and they were together for five years and then they broke up. All the kids moved away because they were older and the younger ones were put in foster homes again. We were stuck in nineteen different foster homes and twelve different schools. It was pissing me off. I was like, "Why can't I just stay in one spot?" So that's when I told him I wanted to be back with my step mom. I love my step mom. You see the Children's Aid took us saying, like, you know, that she's too young to take care of all of you. So my twin brother, X, and my sister, X, and me, we all went with my step mom. Then my brother took off with my dad after. After that, all of us girls stayed with my step mom. Then X and X, another brother and sister, came with us, so we all stayed with her. And everybody else took off wherever the hell they wanted to. Like I haven't seen much of my twin brother. I've talked to him on the phone but I've never seen him. (Isabelle, personal communication, February 26, 2001)

Both Allison and Isabelle's views of their families, again, were typical of other young women in the study, who noted family dysfunction with a high prevalence of marital discord, parental alcoholism, and child abuse that traced

back to their births and early childhood years. For the most part, the young women viewed their parents as unable to love or to be nurturing. Often, their parents' inadequacies were due to their own personal difficulties, such as alcoholism and drug addiction, unemployment, mental health issues, and traumatic childhoods. These events were said to have contributed to the young women's failings, as they attempted to make peace with their difficult pasts.

Unlike the other young women in the study, Gabrielle painted an especially positive portrait of her early childhood years.

...[I]'m an only child. And, we actually grew up in Germany, like, I did. I lived there for nine years and it's always very close family contact. [When I was growing up], it was special. I had a lot of opportunities most children didn't get. Because I lived in Germany, every summer we would travel. And, I've been to Greece, I've been to Spain, I've been all over the place. And I loved it, you know. I've experienced different things. I mean, my parents when I was younger, they were always there for me. My dad had a lot more patience and we'd do things as a family, you know. Like, we'd go out bike riding on Sundays or we'd go out shopping together or we'd all go to the playground. We'd all sit on the swings. But family time, it was great. We were always there for each other.... Our family life used to be great until I basically hit fourteen. And after that, everything just went downhill. (Gabrielle, personal communication, February 9, 2001)

Many of the young women acknowledged having difficulty dealing with the separation or divorce of their parents, new partners of parents, blended families, and other changes in their families. Oftentimes, these events were cited as the cause of their personal problems and "troublesome" behaviour. Allison, whose father had left when she was a small child, had been living alone with her mother and three siblings until her mother entered into a new relationship. Adjusting to

her mother's new partner was not so easy, as his presence changed the family dynamics. This is what Allison had to say:

My mom remarried to this guy ... when I was eight. It was really hard because I was used to it being mommy and kids and then some big guy comes in the house.... I didn't like him at all because he and three more kids and those kids took my place.... Me and my step dad would fight all the time because he didn't approve of me arguing with my mom. So he would get involved. We'd have a couple of physical fights.... So, that was when I wasn't needed anymore. (Allison, personal communication, January 20, 2001)

Consequently, Allison left the family home and moved to the streets at eleven years of age. She admitted her goal was "to get rid of him," however, as she explained: "It didn't work because they're still together" (Allison, personal communication, January 20, 2001).

Elizabeth recounted a similar story, as her mother recently became involved with a new partner and they have since had a child together. Elizabeth had this to offer:

My mom's boyfriend, he's been with her for about a year.... I don't like him.... We were always fighting and screaming at each other.... He always put me down, like, we were always disagreeing and we always, I dunno, it was just very bad.... So I left [in January 2000], I couldn't deal with the stress. I couldn't deal with all the anger. I couldn't deal with my mom at the time, so I left... I was away for about seven months and then I went home [in August]. Then in September, the beginning of October, and then I couldn't take the stress anymore so I left. And then, I went to [a shelter] and then I stayed there until December 17th. Then I went to my friend's place. And then, I started to stay at my sister's. (Elizabeth, personal communication, January 26, 2001)

Isabelle's father, too, was perceived as not being there for her. Isabelle shared with me her feelings of betrayal and isolation.

I love my dad, but I don't appreciate the way that he threw me out. He can't even listen to his own kid. He listens to his new wife, you

know. She's one year older than me, okay. And she's telling me I have to call her mom. And there's no way in hell that I'm ever gonna call her mom. She's one year older than me. And she got pissed off at me. I love my dad, you know. But if he's just gonna pick her over me, you know, than that's his problem. (Isabelle, personal communication, February 26, 2001)

The families' failure to provide protection and guidance and to socialize their daughters is clear from the preceding accounts. In addition, the young women were deprived of much needed love and support that could have been provided by a caring adult role model or positive extended-family relationships. Thus, the young women were denied parental supervision that may have helped them cope with their problems. Further, as we will now see, the young women were estranged from their families in more ways than one.

Children's Aid Societies (CAS) Involvement

Few people would deny that the state has the responsibility to protect the welfare of its people, especially those that cannot protect themselves. And in the course of so doing that, the state may have to intervene and take a child into its care, oftentimes because of poverty. This was the case for a number of young women in the study who reported that the Children's Aid Societies (CAS) had removed them from their families and placed them in numerous foster and group homes.

A problem with the foster care system has been the frequent movement of children from one placement setting to another. Similar to many children in care, half of the young women had fairly extensive histories of involvement with the child protection system dating back to their early childhood years. In fact, stable living arrangements were not a reality for many of the young women interviewed.

Isabelle was one such young woman who was shuffled between countless foster homes, oftentimes being separated from her siblings. Here, Isabelle talks about her multiple placements:

My step mom, she took care of us [18 children] from when she was fifteen 'cause her mom died and my dad was helping her.... She moved in with us and after a while my dad took off again. They split up and got back together again and they were together for five years and then they broke up. All the kids moved away because they were older and the younger ones were put in foster homes again.... You see the Children's Aid took us saying like, you know, that she's too young to take care of all of [us].... We were stuck in nineteen different foster homes.... It was pissing me off. I was like, "Why can't I just stay in one spot?" (Isabelle, personal communication, February 26, 2001)

The distress of living in nineteen different foster homes did not end there.

Isabelle explains further:

[I experienced abuse] all the time when I was growing up, even in my foster homes. One day when me and my twin brother, we were together, my foster parents locked us in this fucking little cage or whatever the fuck it was. We were stuck in there for twelve hours. All she gave us was fucking bread. And when I got the chance when they left, I called my step mom. I was crying. I was like, "I don't wanna stay here anymore." My twin brother was really sick and we had to get outta there. So the Children's Aid came and they saw us in there so they took us and they called my mom. My step mom came and got us. (Isabelle, personal communication, February 26, 2001)

Another young woman, Dorothy, indicated that abuse in the family home had led to her initial involvement with the CAS. However, involvement in recent years was the result of Dorothy acting out of control. Dorothy provided me with this account:

Children's Aid got involved ... in '82 when my sister was born. I guess someone called on my dad.... They closed [the file] in '82 and opened it again in '85 ... 'cause my mom, like, my mom was nearly never home 'cause she had to support the family. She didn't

have a babysitter so she'd leave me and my sister.... So the next door neighbour called on her. And, they closed that file 'cause they couldn't back it up, or whatever.... [CAS became involved] again in '94 ... 'cause me and my sister used to fight and my mom blew, so my mom used to call the cops. And there'd be like fights, fights. The CAS didn't know what to do. They thought my mother was a bitch 'cause she didn't wanna come between me and my sister. She didn't wanna get kicked or hit.... [T]hey closed the file 'cause they didn't have anything to back it up.... Children's Aid got involved [again] when I went to the group home, which was in '98 or '99. (Dorothy, personal communication, January 24, 2001)

In a period of less than two years, Dorothy lived in four different group homes. Here is what she had to say about that experience:

I was in a few [group homes]. My first group home was an emergency group home ... and I was there for, like, forty-eight days. Then, they moved me to [another group home] ... and it didn't go so well there. I don't know what happened but they couldn't handle my situation so they moved me to [yet another] group home.... I was there for about over a year. And then, my running away kicked in so they sent me to a detention centre. Then after the detention centre, they kicked me out and they sent me to another emergency [group] home. Then, my [16th] birthday came up so then I left. (Dorothy, personal communication, January 24, 2001)

In a similar vein, Carol, too, was made a temporary ward of the Children's Aid Societies (CAS) at age thirteen, when she became involved with drugs and subsequently dropped out of school to go live on the streets. Here, Carol recounts her experience:

CAS was called when I was thirteen. I was running away from my parents 'cause I was doing drugs.... I lived in group homes 'til I was fifteen and a half from when I was about thirteen. And then, I really didn't live in the group home; I'd run away and stuff. But, I was sixteen and a half, I left and I [hitchhiked] to Vancouver. I came back and I lived with my mom for a month and then I went to rehab for ten months. And then, I came back and I lived with my mom for three months and then I left my mom's and then I went to the [YWCA].... But now, they [the CAS] pay my rent and give me food money.... (Carol, personal communication, January 24, 2001)

The fact that many children in care have undergone multiple placements is well documented. In Canada, Kufeldt, Armstrong and Dorash (1988) found that 48 per cent of the children in care in Ontario had experienced at least three placement changes since they had come into care. Whatever the cause, it is safe to assume that moving a child from foster home to foster home or group home to group home is a painful and, at times, damaging experience as illustrated by the young women's personal narratives. Much to the young women's dismay, the child protection system had become a revolving door, with many of them rapidly exiting the system, only to re-enter a short time later.

Family Alcohol and Drug Use

In addition to the young women having reportedly come from extremely troubled and disrupted homes, the young women recounted their childhood memories of the ravages of parental alcoholism and drug addiction on their families. Two young women came from families where their mother or father had serious alcohol problems. Still, another young woman lived with at least three members of her family who had been addicted to alcohol or other drugs or to both.

We can never underestimate the impact of alcohol and other drug use on family processes. Studies have confirmed a strong relationship between parental substance abuse and the adverse impact on family relations (Dunlap, 1992). Moreover, research has pointed to the dissolution of social and protective family networks and practices as a result of such abuse (Anderson, 1990; Dunlap, 1992). Take the case of Allison, for instance:

I don't remember much of [my dad]. I know he was an alcoholic and he used to beat my mom up.... She fears guys because my father used to beat her. And, my father stabbed her at one point. Like, ever since they divorced, my mom has always been afraid of males. So, we grew up that males were assholes and whatever. (Allison, personal communication, January 20, 2001)

Brenda offered a more extreme perspective, which involved her mother, father, and previous stepmother. Regrettably, she grew up in a family where drug addiction took a terrible toll on the family, exacerbating already deteriorating social, economic, and familial networks. You can hear the pain, anger, and loneliness as Brenda tells her story:

...[A]fter [my dad] divorced my mother when I was five, I moved in with my dad. And, I was seeing my mom regularly. And then, he got engaged to this, my wicked witch step mom; he's not with her anymore. But when he got involved with her, he started getting involved with drugs. There was times when I found syringes in my dad's car, and cocaine in my dad's car. And, I brought it to him and I asked, "What's this?" You know, I was young. I knew what it was and I knew it wasn't good.... [M]y dad had his own business for a while and he went bankrupt. He lost our condo, lost his car, lost everything he had 'cause of the drugs and 'cause of my ex step mom. (Brenda, personal communication, January 24, 2001)

Notwithstanding her family's struggles, Brenda very proudly announced that her father has been clean from drugs for the last two and one-half years while her mother has been clean from alcohol and other drugs for one and one-half years.

Unfortunately, the presence of alcohol and drugs within the family unit provided these young women with routine exposure to and socialization toward the tolerance of such behaviour. They learned that alcohol and other drug use is one way to escape unbearable conditions. Therefore, when confronted with similar substance abuse issues, the young women in the study were left to their

own inner resources to cope. Under the best of circumstances, given their lives, the likelihood of dealing effectively with the types of problems these young women confronted was not good. I will revisit this issue toward the end of this chapter.

As the preceding narratives attest, beginning with alcohol and culminating with other drugs, the effects of drinking and drugging afflicted the already vulnerable families in which these young women lived; the result was a growing dissolution of family networks. The young women had nowhere to turn for support and guidance, especially since many of their relationships with their parents and stepparents were already strained, deteriorating, or nonexistent, as was the case with Heln.

Relationships and Family

Six of the young women had trouble getting along with one or both parents or stepparents. They often spoke of strained relationships and inability to communicate. At times, they related their overall frustration with deteriorating family ties. A number of young women made mention of feeling alone in their frustrations. Still, other young women talked about being singled out by a parent as the "bad" one in the family. Allison had the following to say of her family:

[O]ut of the family, it's been me and my brother that are the abusive ones and the violent ones.... [I]n my family, I'm the outsider. Our family is pretty screwed up.... I just started talking to my parents again, for the first time in a couple of years.... I have no contact with [my brother] whatsoever. We stopped talking about a year and a half ago.... My sisters, well, my sister in Hamilton, we don't talk either. We just talked, for the first time in over a year, a week ago.... My other sister I met for the first time in April last year. I met her for the first time in nine years. (Allison, personal communication, January 20, 2001)

When asked about her relationship with her parents, Hein described the following communication patterns:

My mom and I usually fight a lot. We fight about everything all the time. I don't really talk to my dad all that much. We say a few words, but for the most part, we don't really talk. (Hein, personal communication, February 11, 2001)

Several young women felt unaccepted and unloved by various members of their families. The pain of being rejected by her family were felt in the remarks offered once again by Allison:

I really don't have family.... We didn't get along that good. [My mom], me and her always fought also. It was pretty much me and myself only. So, I didn't have pretty much anyone around me to help me out.... I was the outsider of the family, that's how I grew up. (Allison, personal communication, January 20, 2001)

Brenda made the same point about feeling neglected by her father:

[My dad and I] don't have the best relationship anymore just because he, it sounds bad, he thinks with his dick rather than his brain. And, as soon as he gets a girlfriend, he ditches me. And, I don't know what's going on but we don't talk that much. We talk about twice a month. I hardly see him. Me and my dad, we actually got into a big argument last month 'cause I told him, "You're not spending enough time with me and I'd like to just spend some time alone with you, just me and you." He said, "Nope, I can't do that. I have another family and if you wanna spend some time with me, you have to be able to spend it with my family." I was like, "You're my dad, you're not those children's father; you're my dad. I think it should be, you spend at least, like, an hour with me. We could go for coffee or something or go to a movie, just the two of us." He's just; he's in total denial of that. He doesn't want anything to do with that. So, I just told him, well, screw you, basically. (Brenda, personal communication, January 24, 2001)

Similar feelings of betrayal and ambivalence were heard from Dorothy, who sensed that her father wanted her to be someone other than who she is.

Dorothy felt alienated from her family because she frequently felt compared to her older sister, to her disadvantage. Here is what Dorothy had to say:

...[M]y mom was pregnant with me and my dad was so happy 'cause my mom is Native and my dad is Black. And my dad was like so happy that my sister was dark and had black hair. And my mom wasn't happy because my sister reminded her of him. And she prayed for a little girl to have blond hair and to be like Native.... But when she came home [from the hospital] with me, he beat her up, like, so badly. He thought that she was cheating on him, but she wasn't. It was just because I was light [skin colour] and my hair colour didn't match everybody else's hair colour. So, from the whole beginning I wasn't really welcome in the family. My dad said I didn't look like a Black kid should look. (Dorothy, personal communication, January 24, 2001)

Janice provided a similar account of feeling unloved:

[My mom], she loves me, but yet at the same time, I feel like she hates me.... She doesn't really want me around that much any more as opposed to before.... So I started thinking that she just doesn't like me any more.... There's like a tension. Her and my dad didn't get along very well. They were only together for like five or six years. They had me and then they kinda had to go their own way. And I'm a lot like my father. So I think that's why we don't get along.... I'm sure we could've gotten along a lot more, if I was more like my mom and less like my dad. (Janice, personal communication, March 11, 2001)

A common thread running through the young women's interviews are that they felt left out of their families. Because their relationships with their parents and stepparents were strained, many of the young women found it difficult to convey their distress to family members. Feeling at odds with their families, the young women frequently struggled with feelings of loneliness, difficulties in school, and increasing isolation from conventional and prosocial activities.

Although confronted with traumas, distress, victimization and abandonment within their family, the young women in the study still managed to

uncover strengths within their family members. Stories of their parent's strengths were related almost with a sense of pride. In some cases, the young women boasted of their mother or father's abilities. As Frances recounted:

My dad, he's got every strength you could possibly want. My dad rocks. He's like the best man. I dunno what his strengths and weaknesses are.... Like, he's good at talking to people. He's good at making jokes.... I just love my dad so much, man. (Frances, personal communication, February 4, 2001)

Carol's description of her parent's strengths followed this pattern:

My mom, she's caring, honest, that's it. My dad's fine. He's tender. He doesn't know how to show it, but he is; 'cause he can't he can't say I love you.... No one has ever given it to him; he doesn't know what it means. But you know he loves you. But I understand that. He's caring. (Carol, personal communication, January 24, 2001)

Then again, while some young women described troubled families, they still found it within them to praise their mothers and fathers for raising them in a satisfactory manner. Here, Elizabeth tells us of her mother's position:

[My mom], she's a nice person. She's always honest. She's loving. She takes care; she took, like, as much care of me as she could. She tried to help me as much as she could. And, you know, she's trying to help me as much as she can now. (Elizabeth, personal communication, January 26, 2001)

Allison also offered similar words of praise even though she has been estranged from her family for years. She stated simply: "For my mom, well, she raised us the best way she could. I'm proud of her.... I don't know, I really don't know what our strengths are because we've been split up for so long (Allison, personal communication, January 20, 2001).

While the majority of young women could identify positive attributes in their family members, in many cases, the home did not provide a respite from verbal, emotional, or physical abuse and, in several cases, sexual abuse. As we shall see next, the witnessing and experiencing of abuse was far from an uncommon event in the young women's everyday lives.

"Hurt me Days"

The term "abuse" can generally be taken to mean to hurt a person by treating him or her wrongly or to injure someone. However, in speaking with the participants in the study, I left it up to each young woman to define what she considered to be an abusive experience. Most of the young women conveyed incidents of physical and sexual abuse while others spoke of verbal and emotional abuse. As we shall see shortly, whatever forms the abuse took the nature and extent were serious. Also, most of the young women disclosed an array of experiences, which had happened to them throughout the short span of their lives. Abusers ranged from parents, stepparents, and foster parents to siblings, relatives, friends, group home staff, acquaintances, and strangers. In listening to the young women's stories, I wanted to not only understand the nature and extent of their abuse, but also the impact of the abuse had on each of the young women.

All ten of the young women I interviewed had a lifetime of experience with verbal, emotional, and/or physical abuses. Oftentimes, the young women were threatened and repeatedly called names, such as "bitch," "slut," "skank," and "whore." What is more, six young women reported that while growing up they were regularly beaten by a family member. Another young woman incurred

institutional violence, where group home staff physically restrained her on numerous occasions while living in a residential facility.

However, the abuse was not limited to beatings. Three young women were sexually abused on numerous occasions. One young woman was victimized by several different members of her immediate and extended family. The other young woman did not disclose the relationship of her perpetrator. Yet, another young woman had been raped on two separate occasions before the age of seventeen. The numbers of young women add up to more than ten because in some cases the young woman had experienced more than one form of abuse. As the young women talked about their childhoods and the abuses they were subjected to, it became clear that their early years were a far cry from a safe and secure childhood.

Not all the abuse was directed solely at the young women themselves. Nonetheless, it was indicative of the general distressful nature of the family unit. Witnessing acts of abuse was a harmful consequence for five of the young women, who had seen their mothers being slapped, hit, pushed, or punched by their fathers or stepfathers. For four of the young women, it was the biological father who perpetrated the violence, while one young woman said it was her stepfather who was responsible for the abuse. Here, Dorothy recounts one such experience where she remembers her father severely beating her mother.

...[M]y dad was really violent. He was like the guy you didn't wanna mess with. He's the guy that had no mercy.... My dad used to beat [my mom] to the pulp, until she'd bleed and stuff like that.... Yeah, I couldn't protect her from getting hit from much but, you know, I could try. And then, I'd get beat. And then, my mom would try to defend me and she'd get more beat and I'd get beat and so.

Me and my sister used to get beaten a lot. Hurt me days.... This guy was like big. My mom is a small person. So like, he'd beat me and my sister 'til like we're bruised. Like, he'd beat my mom until she bled.... There's [one] incident I can remember with my mom and him. There was this time with white furniture.... We were living in Toronto at the time and our living room was in white marble. And the wall unit was this, like, glass. This guy went crazy and he started smashing everything, like, the furniture. Glass was everywhere. I like blinked for two seconds and then I, like, opened my eyes and I could see everything covered in his blood. This guy was, like, crazy. (Dorothy, personal communication, January 24, 2001)

Speaking of her father, Isabelle provided a similar, although less vivid, account of witnessing violence:

I seen my dad hit my step mom ... because my mom told him to leave. And he smashed the windows and stuff and whatever. He hit my mom first and then he smashed the windows. I turned around and hit him with the frying pan and he hit the ground.... But it really hurt me seeing him hit my mom 'cause my mom had a black eye. And that really hurt me, you know. I really got it when he woke up. I really got the licking when my dad woke up. (Isabelle, personal communication, February 26, 2001)

Frances, too, described an incident where she witnessed her stepfather hitting her mother in the young woman's presence:

I saw my step dad smack my mom once. And it was because she was trying to defend me.... Okay, when we go into my mom's house, like, my step dad likes it when everybody takes off their shoes and puts them in the closet and doesn't leave them on the mat. So his shoes were sitting out on the mat, so I left my shoes on the mat 'cause his were there. So, I figured mine were allowed to be too. And, I woke up in the morning to go to school and I had to search around in the snow for my shoes because he threw them outside. And his shoes were still on the mat. So I took his shoes and I buried them in the snow.... And he flipped when he got downstairs.... He just started yelling. I was like; "I threw them in the snow ... because you threw my shoes out in the snow." It's like six [o'clock] in the morning and I gotta go to school, man. My shoes are soaking wet. And they're in the snow and they're the only pair of shoes I have. Like, he had more pairs of shoes. Like, man, he flipped. And, like, he just started yelling and then my mom

came down. And she said, "What are you yelling for?" And I explained it to her and he explained it to her and we both explained the same thing 'cause, you know, we couldn't really say anything different, it's what happened. And she just said, "Well, don't throw my daughter's shoes [in the snow]. What if she gets gangrene or frostbite or something?" And, she started freaking on him and then he smacked her and told her to shut up. And I was just about to him, but then my school bus show up so I went and got on my school bus. And I called my mom from school, like, as soon as I got there.... And that's why she stopped trying to defend me.... (Frances, personal communication, February 4, 2001)

When asked what Frances would do to her stepfather today if the same thing happened again, she simply replied, "I know for a fact he wouldn't do it now. 'Cause he knows for a fact, if he did, I'd kill him" (Frances, personal communication, February 4, 2001).

Although a much smaller number, one young woman admitted to observing her stepmother engage in violence toward her father. Take Brenda's account of witnessing violence in her family while growing up:

I've seen a lot. I watched my dad get beaten up with a baseball bat by my step mom in our house. She [even] bit a chunk out of his shoulder. And, like, the chunk of his skin, like, the skin was off and it was gross. It was pretty bad. (Brenda, personal communication, January 24, 2001)

The young women also recounted stories of seeing their siblings fighting amongst one another and their fathers pushing, hitting, and punching their brothers. Here is what Heln had to say about a situation involving her father and brother:

I [remember] this one time, I don't even know what it was about. My dad and brother had this huge argument. My brother went to, they were yelling and everything, my brother went to his room and he locked the door. My dad tried to get into my brother's room. I don't remember how it happened exactly, they were pushing each other around and hitting each other.... My brother ended up

leaving the house, not coming back for a while. (Heln, personal communication, February 11, 2001)

Physical abuse was very much a part of the young women's lives. The young women told stories of being repeatedly beaten by their siblings, a mother "chaining" one young woman in a closet, both a father and stepmother beating one young woman, and even a case where one young woman's brother stabbed her. Here, Dorothy and Isabelle reflect on the frequent beatings they received from their siblings and tell how they handled the situations. First, Dorothy explains:

[M]e and my sister used to never get along ... maybe like when we were two or three. Me and her both have our tempers from our dad. So, me and her growing up was like fights, fights, fights, fights, fights. And then, when I turned like twelve, or maybe ten, I started going to karate, army cadets, weightlifting, and stuff like that 'cause my sister always used to beat the crap outta me. So I was like, "Okay, you wanna kick the crap outta me now, I'll show you what's up." And those fights got pretty bad. Like I remember a few times, like, I had no mercy on her actually.... I tried once to seriously hurt her. We were having an argument over I forget what. I was trying to get at my sister as she's always picking on me. My mom was in the middle trying to split us up. Out of frustration, I picked up ... a big ass ten pound, like, heavy marble rock that I tried to throw at her head.... It didn't hit her, but made a hole in the bedroom door.... Now, me and her barely ever talk 'cause, well, we don't get along. (Dorothy, personal communication, January 24, 2001)

As Isabelle related:

...[M]y twin brother, he had these boxing gloves, right, and he kept on hitting me in the back of the head.... That's when I was living with my dad. And my brother really hated me.... It's because I kept on calling my [step mom] "mom," even though she's my step mom 'cause she's been there for me ever since I was two. I left my real mom because she was abusive and she was always hitting me.... He kept on hitting me, hitting me, hitting me and he was pissing me off. And he threw a knife at my eye. So I turned around and really just punched the hell out of him. He had a broken nose

and his eye was puffed out.... Yeah, I broke his nose. I was happy that I did, you know.... My brother deserved it 'cause he wouldn't stop picking on me.... I was like, "Leave me the fuck alone, you asshole." He was fucking pissing me off. My dad blamed everything on me. He got fucking pissed off and used the belt on me. I didn't cause the shit; it was my brother that kept on picking on me. He threw a knife at my eye and I had to get a patch on my eye for two months. (Isabelle, personal communication, February 26, 2001)

Speaking of her mother's physically abusive behaviour toward her, Isabelle once again recounts a story replete with pain and rejection:

My real mom, she put us with those chains, you know, those dog chains; she tied me up into the closet. Like I had red marks on me and I was bleeding. My dad was crying [when he came home] and he was like, "How can you do that to your own fucking kid?" She was like, "I never wanted them anyways." It hurt me, too. I was like, what did I do? Why was I born if no one wants me, you know? (Isabelle, personal communication, February 26, 2001)

Another young woman, Brenda, reported a particular event where both her father and her stepmother beat her at the same time. Here is what she had to say:

[My father and stepmother], they'd blame little stuff on me. And, there was this one time, her suntan lotion, okay, there was a big hole in it in the bottom and they blamed it on me. And I had no clue about how this suntan lotion could all of a sudden had a hole in it, in the bottom. And, they blamed it on me. And, they just beat me up, both of them at the same time. (Brenda, personal communication, January 24, 2001)

Continuing with her saga of harmful events, Brenda described yet another situation where she suffered physical abuse and humiliation, this time at the hands of her stepmother:

My step mom [dislocated] my shoulder; it's still dislocated.... [S]he psyched me out. She grabbed me by my arm and, like, twisted it. And, she sent me out in the hallway and I was only in my underwear and bra and I was, like, a little kid. And, I had to go

downstairs to security and wait for my dad to come home for me to go into the house. She wouldn't let me in. So, I was outside, like, in the building for, like, five hours just in my bra and underwear. (Brenda, personal communication, January 24, 2001)

In Rosenbaum's (1989) review of the life situations of more than two hundred young women held by the California Youth Authority in the early 1960s, the author found similar patterns of abuse. In fact, her findings revealed that more than one-third of the parents had been charged with abuse or neglect.

Allison, yet another young woman, recalled her tumultuous relationship with her older brother, pointing to a two-inch scar of her arm where he had stabbed her with a knife. Notwithstanding the seriousness of the incident, Allison subsequently shielded her brother from possible consequences:

My own brother stabbed me once.... Me and my brother, when we were little, we always fought. We didn't get along and he was always in and out of foster homes.... [A]t about age ten or eleven, we got into a fight and he decided he'd pull out a knife. My brother is, like, three years older than me. I guess he didn't think it would stab me, but it did. And, he just came up to me running and he went to stab me and he stabbed my arm. So now, I have a scar. (Allison, personal communication, January 20, 2001)

Later,

And, when my parents got home, I told them I cut myself on a rusty nail so they wouldn't know. Yeah, we always tried to protect each other. So, I let him get away with it. (Allison, personal communication, January 20, 2001)

In many of the young women's accounts, much of the family abuse was inflicted under the guise of discipline. Eight of the young women said they had been thrown against walls, had had their faces slapped, had been hit with various objects, and whipped with belts. Surprisingly, a number of young women were rather ambivalent about their beatings. On the one hand, they

acknowledged that the abuse was wrong. However, at other times, they felt it was deserved. Gabrielle described a contradictory account of her father's behaviour, when he pushed her down the basement stairs:

Well, yeah, like my dad, he pushed me down the stairs but that's just because he wanted to knock some sense into me, you know what I mean. Like, I'm not defending him and I'm not saying that it was right of him to do that because it wasn't. But I understand where he's coming from. Like, I slammed the door in his face and he, like, opened it and I was being a bitch that night. I refused to talk to him and I'd been out all night and I didn't explain where I was. And they thought I was being irresponsible and they were worried about me. They wanted to know what was going on, which is understandable. (Gabrielle, personal communication, February 9, 2001)

Speaking of her mother's conduct, Janice minimized her experience of being hit as a child:

If I was bad, like if I did something that I wasn't supposed to do, that I knew I wasn't supposed to do and went and did it anyway, then obviously my mom would hit me. I got the wooden spoon as a child. I got the flyswatter. I got a rolled up newspaper, stuff like that. If I just did minor little things that she really didn't like then she'd come and smack me upside the head, you know what I mean. I got hit quite a bit, but not to the point where I was bleeding or anything. I learned my lesson, you know what I mean, I did. I'm not really mad at her for using violence. Like, I can't be because that's the way she decided to do what she did ... to bring me up. So I can't really argue with that. (Janice, personal communication, March 11, 2001)

It appears that violence is such an integral part of these young women's lives that it is difficult for them to distinguish between punishment and abuse. In their minds, love and abuse are somehow connected, therefore affecting the young women's perceptions of what constitutes positive relationships. Dale Spender (1985), a feminist writer, underscores the importance of naming abuse as it relates to women's experiences:

In order to live in the world, we must name it. Names are essential for the construction of reality, for without a name it is difficult to accept the existence of an object, an event, a feeling. (p. 163)

As the young women's stories attest, they reflect different aspects of naming abuse. In many cases, the young women had difficulties in defining events in their lives as abusive or violent, rather they saw their parents' actions as a form of punishment. Yet, in listening to the narratives of their childhoods, I arrived at the conclusion that the young women's lives were often characterized by abuse. However, this is my evaluation, and not necessarily one, which the young women themselves hold. This raises the issue of who names the abuse and for what purpose. It also raises the question of who or what is being named. Thus, naming abuse requires attention to not only the nature of the young women's experiences, but also what social and structural conditions are contributing to the abuse.

The abuse experienced by the young women did not end with verbal, emotional, and physical violations. One young woman I interviewed was sexually abused by her sister and her stepbrother in her immediate family, as well as an "uncle" in her extended family. A second young woman I spoke with had recollections of sexual abuse that dated back to when she was seven years old. She did not reveal the identity of her abuser. This comes as no surprise since a study by Gilfus (1988) found that 55 per cent of her subjects had been sexually abused as children, beginning in early childhood and some continuing for years.

According to Pipher (1994), these types of sexual assaults, which are committed by family members, especially when the victim is young, tend to produce the most trauma (p. 220). As a way of coping with their situations, the young women in the study have learned to block or conceal the abuse and to internalize their pain and feelings. Keeping the secret to themselves has not been without consequences for each of these young women. They described the emotional fallout, such as feelings of shame, guilt, and anger, as well as confusion about who they are and their sense of self. Allison talked about the sexual abuse and described some of the feelings, which have dominated most of her life:

I was sexually abused by my sister, and my uncle, and my stepbrother.... Things went on for a couple of months with my sister and my uncle; things were going on at the same time. It went on for a couple of months and then it stopped with my sister when she finally got a boyfriend. And then it continued with my uncle for a little while, I think altogether for about a year. And then, we moved away. My stepbrother, he ended up moving back with his mom so it only happened the once.... My uncle, he was the worst. We got kicked out of our house once and so we had to go stay with my mom's best friend. Well, this guy, he wasn't really my uncle but we called them auntie and uncle, and we ended up having to stay with them. Me and my sisters, we got stuck in a room with bunk beds. And, I don't know why, but I always had a bad feeling about my mom's best friends' husband. And I always begged to sleep on the top bunk. But my mom said no. Yeah, so stuff happened. And until this day, she still doesn't know. And, like, I regret not saying anything, but at the same time; it's also all this shame and everything that [the abuse] brought to me. I'm glad that nobody did know because it makes me feel disgusting about myself. Like, I know now that it wasn't my fault and I couldn't do anything about it, but it happened. And now, it's something I have to deal with throughout my life.... Now, I try not to think of it, but it comes back every now and then. I just wish I could ask why, but you can't. Oh, you can, but that's if you want to bring it up after so many years. (Allison, personal communication, January 20, 2001)

Heln, another young woman, also revealed the tragedy of sexual abuse; however, she was reluctant to discuss the circumstances other than to say that, "[W]hen I was young I started getting, when I was seven I started getting touched and until I was ten" (Heln, personal communication, February 11, 2001). When I asked how often this would happen, she replied, "sometimes a few times a week" (Heln, personal communication, February 11, 2001). It appears that Heln has blocked out any recollections of her early childhood years. The comments of Heln reveal this sad situation, "I don't remember most of my childhood. I have like a few memories, like, here and there. Up until I was ten or eleven, I don't remember too much" (Heln, personal communication, February 11, 2001).

Still, a third young woman was recently raped on two separate occasions by different perpetrators. Gabrielle described one of the incidents and disclosed how she handled her feelings:

It was in Quebec, in Otter Lake, which is a country village, you know. And, it was at this guy's pool party. And, like, we're all just swimming around and there had been some pot. And, I didn't smoke any because I don't do drugs. And, everybody else was high. And, my best friend was right there, you know, and she was too involved with this guy to do anything, you know. Like, she was gone, man; she was fucking wasted. And this guy was coming on to me and coming on to me and, like, he wouldn't leave me alone. And, like, I was wearing a pair of boxers and a shirt; that's what I was swimming in. And, he just kept groping me up and I'd tell him no and I'd push him away, you know.... So eventually, I left the pool. I got out and went to the bathroom and he followed me in. And then he locked the door behind me and there was nobody else in the house. Everybody else was in the pool. And, I just froze. I was like, oh my God ... there's nobody here; there's nobody gonna hear me. (Gabrielle, personal communication, February 9, 2001)

I asked Gabrielle how she managed to deal with the rape. She explains:

[M]y best friend didn't believe me.... I was really mad at her. Because of that, basically, that started us growing apart and I don't talk to her anymore, at all.... I didn't tell my parents about it. I didn't want to get them involved. This was my life; this is my problem. And, I don't want them having to deal with the emotional baggage of it.... So, it was just kind of sheltering them from it.... I was too shamed to tell my parents 'cause I thought, yeah, it's my fault, you know. Like, I shouldn't have been there; it was the wrong place and time for me, you know. Like, I shouldn't have even gone with my best friend. (Gabrielle, personal communication, February 9, 2001)

The stories of Allison, Heln, and Gabrielle are each very different. Still, within each story there is a common insight, in that, the young women felt they had no one to confide in or turn to for support as they attempted to deal with their anger and resentment. Yet, for young women like Allison, Heln, and Gabrielle to be able to heal from their experiences of sexual abuse, the secret and the silence, which surrounds it, must be broken. Regrettably, other young women in the study reported growing up in similar unstable environments and that they too felt alone and unprotected in having to deal with the aftermath of abuse.

In the process of trying to take control of their situations, however, the young women developed particular survival strategies. In many respects, these skills became damage control techniques or ways of coping with the abuse and its consequences. More often than not, the young women turned to alcohol, drugs, and/or self-harming behaviours. In some cases, using alcohol and other drugs or attempting suicide was simply one part of their troubled lives. But in other cases, as we shall see, the behaviours offered an escape, a way of dulling the painful memories of abuse or unbearable living conditions.

Seeing the Patterns

For some young women in the study, alcohol and drug use was interpreted as simply one part of their life on the street. It was a way of “fitting in with the crowd” or it became attractive when “everybody else” was doing it. Yet, for other young women, it was more apparent that alcohol and other drug use were closely connected to their abuse history and its effects. Therefore, listening to the young women’s stories as told here will allow us a better appreciation of the complex ways in which a young woman’s alcohol and/or drug use may be located within the context of her troubled life.

Drinking and Drugs

Many of the young women were confronted with numerous problems, such as depression, poverty, parental alcoholism and drug addiction, family violence, physical and sexual abuse in childhoods, homelessness, as well as extremely troubled and disrupted home environments. As a result of having to deal with these difficulties, the young women found themselves drifting into alcohol and other drugs as a way to fill the void created by their distressed lives.

Most of the young women I interviewed had experimented extensively with alcohol and other drugs. In fact, all of the young women reported using drugs at some point in their lives. The young women who used alcohol and other drugs differed in their preferred substance, their frequency of use, and their patterns of use.

Their self-reported drug use included experiences with alcohol, marijuana, weed, weed oil, hashish, hash oil, speed, crystal, uppers, cocaine, mushrooms,

mescaline, acid, PCP, Ketamine, ecstasy, and GHB. Alcohol, weed, and ecstasy were named as their favourite drugs.

Two of the young women used drugs on a daily basis. One young woman reported using drugs weekly. Two young women said they used drugs infrequently. Three young women had recently quit using alcohol and other drugs altogether. The final two young women did not use illicit drugs; instead they preferred to drink alcohol on an occasional basis. When I asked one young woman how often she used drugs, she replied nonchalantly, "I smoke weed a lot. I do it every day. It keeps me sane. I can deal with stuff a lot easier when I'm high" (Janice, personal communication, March 11, 2001).

The young women's initiation into drugs usually started with alcohol and cannabis. Their peer groups more often than not introduced the young women to alcohol and other drugs during their early teen years. One young woman said, however, she became involved out of curiosity. Gabrielle remembers the setting when she began smoking weed:

[D]rugs, I went through an experimentation stage and that lasted about half a year.... That was in grade eleven, the first time, so when I was sixteen. That was before I was depressed. Or maybe I was at the beginning of my depression, anyways, around there. I think I used it as an escapism, you know what I mean. Like, I was okay, if all these people are doing it, it's not really peer pressure, but why are so many people doing it, you know. Like, are they just all following each other or is it something that's actually interesting. Is there just cause for so many people doing it, you know? So it was more curiosity. And, I didn't get hooked on it. I didn't become a pothead necessarily. Like, I just, I did it once a week, you know, for about four months. Just weed. And I've done 'shrooms once, but never touched harsher stuff, never.... And, I don't do it anymore. (Gabrielle, personal communication, February 9, 2001)

On the other hand, Dorothy attributed her introduction to alcohol and other drugs to peer influence.

Drugs played a part in my life for less than a year. That was from September of last year 'til around the summer. And drinking, well obviously, it still plays a part in my life. First, it was marijuana 'cause since I was fifteen and I never smoked a joint, you know everybody wanted me to smoke a joint. Then there was the hash. Since you do marijuana, you gotta do hash. I quit marijuana sooner than I quit hash. I smoked hash for a little bit longer. And, there was, like, going to clubs and there was, like, uppers. And then, there was in the bar, I only did it once, but it was 'shrooms. (Dorothy, personal communication, January 24, 2001)

As the personal accounts of Gabrielle and Dorothy attest, youth by their very nature are experimental. Newcomb and Bentler (1989) also observed that drug experimentation and social rule-breaking phases have long been viewed as part of the ego development of youth.

Some of the young women continued to use alcohol and cannabis with their peers. Eventually they started using harder drugs, such as amphetamines, cocaine, LSD, and other hallucinogens. For several of the young women, there was a direct connection between drinking and drugging and their use of violence. Brenda, for instance, described herself as a "big chemical." She had been using alcohol and other drugs since the age of ten shortly after her father kicked her out of the house because she and her stepsister ran away. She explains:

Yeah, a lot of drugs and alcohol were involved in my life. I started when I was ten years old as soon as I moved to Vanier.... I started getting into drugs and got into fights. I just rebelled, like, I was really rebellious towards my mother and school and any authority. And then, when I was fourteen, I decided to go onto the streets. And, I learned a lot and that.... And, I started smoking pot and drinking. And, then I got into the chemicals, such as mescaline, ecstasy, speed, coke, and that's about it, 'shrooms. I was a big chemical for a bit. I still use, but not as much.... I just drink once in

a while. I hardly use drugs. (Brenda, personal communication, January 24, 2001)

Brenda described how drugs changed her as a person and transformed her life.

I think drugs, like, changed my whole life a lot, changed me a lot. Before when I was young, I was like a sweet innocent girl. I didn't talk to anybody, I was very quiet and then it came to be being violent, verbally silencing people, and just thinking that I was the shit, thinking that I was better than everybody else. Really, I'm not 'cause everybody's cool, I think, now. (Brenda, personal communication, January 24, 2001)

The pressures associated with "being thin" may also manifest themselves in young women's alcohol and other drug use. In a study carried out by Joe (1995), women rationalized their use of amphetamines, particularly crystal meth, in gendered ways. The drug has the effect of an appetite suppressant, which allows people to stay thin and thus provides a source of self-confidence. Moreover, crystal meth gives them increased energy. Take a look at how crystal meth impacted on Frances' body and provided her with energy in order to survive on the streets of Vancouver:

Crystal meth ... it takes away your appetite and it makes you stay awake for days and days.... I weighed ninety-five pounds.... Like, if you do enough of it, you'll stay awake for however long you're doing it for. I used to stay awake for like, the longest I stayed awake for was the first time I went to Vancouver. I stayed awake for like, twenty-three days straight and then I passed out for, like, a week and a half. And, the longest time I stayed awake, the last time I was there, I stayed awake for two weeks.... Yeah, so I went to Nelson Park and I passed out in the park for like eight or nine hours. (Frances, personal communication, February 4, 2001)

Since then, however, Frances has pretty well quit using chemical drugs.

She explains:

I quit chemicals pretty much. Like, I'll do ecstasy every now and then. And, like, I'll do mushrooms any day of the week. I'll smoke

weed all the time, hash whatever, just chemicals aren't my thing anymore. 'Cause, like, when I was in Vancouver and I did all that crystal meth, it fucked me up, like, man.... Crystal meth is a bad thing. No, no, I'll never touch it again.... I came back here ... and I've gone up to one twenty-five [pounds] since then. (Frances, personal communication, February 4, 2001)

For other young women in the study, alcohol and drug use was often connected with physical and sexual abuse in their childhood. In some cases, the abuse was severe and their families were unable to provide a protective home environment. In the case of Allison, the abuse became horrific so she left home and went to live on the streets at age eleven. She started using alcohol and other drugs shortly thereafter. As Allison described it, drinking and drugging provided a way for her to forget the pain and to cope:

I remember those days and the people I used to hang around with who were doing heroin and crack and coke; those were the worst days of my life. Then, like, at that point, they were good days. But now that I look back at it, it was a waste of my life.... I got addicted to coke and coke is a really powerful drug.... I used cocaine for about three years of my life. At the time, I loved the drug, like; I loved it so much that I was doing it every day.... Yeah, I was drinking and doing other drugs. But coke seemed to be the main drug that brought out my bitchiness and violence the most.... Alcohol did the same thing; it brought out the violence.... I think it played a really big part in it, too. It made me not feel, like, not have feelings. I didn't feel pain. It was a way to cope with stuff. (Allison, personal communication, January 20, 2001)

I asked Allison where she got the money to support her habit. Here is what she had to say:

[When] I was fourteen ... [t]here was a time when I used to beat up people for money. I guess it was the whole drug thing. If you owe money, I was the person to call and collect it. I ended up becoming a debt collector doing that stuff. (Allison, personal communication, January 20, 2001)

While there are evidently clear connections between Allison's drinking and drugging and violent behaviour, her use of alcohol and other drugs can also be located in the context of her lifelong struggle to cope with physical and sexual abuse as a child and its horrendous effects.

The personal narratives of these young women attest to their use of alcohol and other drugs as a way to forget the emotional and physical pain of abuse and to escape from the reality of their situations. When viewed within this context, the young women's use of alcohol and other drugs is but one of the manifestations of oppression experienced by them. According to C. Lundy (1988), while alcohol dependence may be commonly viewed as a personal affliction, it is essentially socially constructed in our society. The author maintains that there is a strong relationship between women's alcohol use and the conditions under which they function.

Marian Sandmaier (1982) also supports this view. She states:

A woman's experience with alcoholism cannot be separated from the reality of sexism in our culture. Every dimension of a woman's addiction – its causes, its consequences, its subversive hidden quality, its treatment – are shaped by her subordinate and devalued status. To a large degree, the depth of this connection stems from the sheer pervasiveness of sexism. Women are driven to all kinds of self-destructive escapes from their powerlessness and their conflicted visions of themselves: depression, compulsive eating, other drug addiction, obsessive housekeeping, suicide ... alcohol is only one escape of many. (cited in C. Lundy, 1988, pp. 201-201)

The other problems in the young women's lives influenced not only their introduction to and continuation of alcohol and other drugs, but also their chances for recovery. The lives of these young women resonate with many

commonalties, such as troubled and disrupted home environments, abuse as children, low educational achievement, unemployment, poverty, and, in many cases, non-supportive families. All of these factors can impede the road to recovery. Nevertheless, in light of these barriers, three of the young women saw rehabilitation as offering the potential for change. Take, for instance, Brenda's positive experience with rehabilitation:

I was supposed to get six months closed custody at [a detention centre], but I ended up doing four months and then they gave me early release to do a six-month program at [a drug treatment centre]. That was the best experience in my whole entire life. I'll always remember that. And I graduated from there. (Brenda, personal communication, January 24, 2001)

Allison recalls her experience -- also very rewarding:

Alcohol and drugs, that was one of the reasons I went to rehab.... Yeah, I went to [a drug treatment centre] for two months. And, it was the best experience of my life. I got to learn a lot about myself. (Allison, personal communication, January 20, 2001)

Still, while the young women expressed their desire to change, attempting to do so has been a daunting task. With regard to her ongoing struggle with drug dependency, for instance, Brenda comments:

I stayed clean for a year and then I relapsed. And, I've been off and on now. (Brenda, personal communication, January 24, 2001)

Again, we hear from Allison as she offers a similar account:

I wish I could say that I was still clean now, but I'm not. But I'm close to it. My main goal right now is to stop the drinking and the drugs. So far, it's going so good. (Allison, personal communication, January 20, 2001)

While the young women continue to struggle with their alcohol and drug dependency, it would be a mistake to conclude that the experience of

rehabilitation has offered no benefits to the young women. For the young women, the experience of rehabilitation became but one more thing they had to deal with in the process of overcoming the myriad problems they have encountered in their lives.

The oppressive nature of the young women's lives coupled with a dependence on alcohol and other drugs created a life too often filled with loneliness, frustration, low self-esteem, and anger. The young women responding to the oppression sought to escape their problems through any means possible. For some, the use of alcohol and other drugs offered a possible escape. For others, however, attempted suicide and self-harming behaviours were options. Given the young women's youthful ages, however, this sequence of events was probably only the beginning.

Suicidal Ideations and Self-Harming Behaviour

A significant number of the young women in the study were alienated from themselves, their families, and even their peers. For many of the young women, suicidal ideations and self-harming behaviour began at a young age, with alcohol and other drugs used as an escape for feelings of alienation, frustration, and anger. However, when substance use failed to meet the young women's needs for love and acceptance, suicidal ideations and attempting suicide then became the only perceived way out.

Four of the ten young women interviewed admitted to at least one suicide attempt. In fact, one young woman tried on three separate occasions to end her life. Their accounts revealed two common themes: hopelessness with the current

direction of their lives and alienation. The young women's explanations for suicide attempts and self-harming behaviour included "I didn't feel the need to live any longer," "it was a way to cope with things and I liked doing it," and "it was a way to deal with my depression, inner pain, and confusion."

One young woman, Gabrielle, confided that she felt overwhelmed by a sense of personal despair. She could not hold a job because of her depression, anxiety disorder, and anger management issues. In addition, school was not going well. She was kicked out of high school for non-attendance. Unable to come to terms with her bleak situation, Gabrielle started to cut her arms when she was sixteen years of age. She described it as an "addictive behaviour, similar to smoking" (Gabrielle, personal communication, February 9, 2001). When the "spiral down" finally reached its lowest point, Gabrielle attempted suicide on several occasions. The first time she tried to overdose on pills. The second time, she tried to slit her wrists. Yet, another time, she tried to hang herself. Unfortunately, the noose didn't work. When asked what her reasons were, she replied, "I did this to deal with my depression, inner pain, and confusion" (Gabrielle, personal communication, February 9, 2001).

Allison also found solace and comfort in cutting her arms. She explained that self-cutting was a coping strategy. Here is what Allison had to say:

Cutting myself started when I was seven years old. I started doing it, it was a way to cope with things and I liked doing it. When I began using drugs, I started cutting more and more because, I don't even know, I just like it. It was a way for me to cope with things when people used to call me crack addict or anything. To get that out of my head, I used to cut myself. (Allison, personal communication, January 20, 2001)

Dorothy also felt the effects of the spiral down. Here, Dorothy recalled the stress she felt after her foster parents asked her to leave because of her suicide attempts and self-harming behaviours. At the depths of despair, setting herself on fire was considered a better alternative than remaining in such an undesirable social and psychological state. Dorothy comments on the abandonment and personal isolation that were consequences of her suicide attempts:

Yeah, I went through a stage with suicide attempts a couple of times. That's when my foster parent model home kicked me out 'cause they couldn't handle the situation 'cause it was suicidal depression and self-mutilation. And, there'd be restraint, I was restrained a lot. And since I stopped a few months later, or four months later, then I went to self-mutilation. I first went to minor cuts, then minor restraints, then big restraints, and then I just switched cuts to burns. And, I set myself on fire. But that was stupid. And then after that, I stopped and went into piercings.... I got like fifteen piercings ... my ears ... my eyebrows ... my leg ... my nose.... And then after that, I went to drugs. And then after drugs, I quit that and got into heavy drinking. And then my heavy drinking went into this suicidal, mutilation, born again. So, it was all three of them put together, which wasn't really good 'cause like I was flipping out. They couldn't really help me 'cause when I was drinking, I'd get touchy. Mainly, it's only been a few months since I've been starting to talk about the stuff. Because before, I would not really open up to too many people. (Dorothy, personal communication, January 24, 2001)

Research reveals that young women attempt suicide four to five times more often than their male counterparts, but use less lethal means to do so (Debold, 1995; Canada, 1994). The socio-structural situation of young women influences their vulnerability to depression, suicide, and other forms of violence. Young women are also more likely to attempt suicide if they have experienced physical and sexual abuse, as was the case with many of the participants in the study.

The emotional depths of hitting rock bottom made the young women feel of no consequence. Eventually, however, the overwhelming sense of despair that had overcome them also led them to question and to reevaluate their identities and their social construction of the world. For Allison, it was a turning point in her life. She proudly announced, "Yeah, I've actually been three months clean from doing that" (Allison, personal communication, January 20, 2001)

When the young women's suicide attempts and self-harming behaviours are viewed within this context, these acts can be seen as a reflection of their lonely, despair-filled lives. Certainly, suicidal ideations, attempts, and self-harming behaviours are but an indication of the real experiences of oppression that these young women have survived.

Friends and Social Support Network

When the primary family unit fails to satisfy the needed socialization that engenders positive development or fails to provide an atmosphere of stability, young women may look elsewhere to meet their needs for attachment. The desire to be popular and the sense of belonging to a peer group fostered by friendship fulfill some very basic psychological needs for young women. Specifically, belonging to a peer group lets a young woman establish her individual identity within the group, gain acceptance, and, at the same time, increase her popularity.

For the young women in the study, hanging around friends or peer groups fulfilled two purposes: it provided them with a refuge from their chaotic childhoods and served as social function. For many of the young women, their peer groups had replaced their families, who simply were not there to give them

any sort of guidance. With little or no emotional connections to their families and no place where they belonged and were accepted and protected, the importance of the peer group escalated for these young women.

The importance the young women placed upon allies was evident as they discussed their friends and notions of friendships. All the young women reported spending a significant portion of their waking hours most days with their peer groups, without any sort of adult supervision. The young women and their friends gathered at shopping malls, fast-food restaurants or diners, downtown at the square, the drop-in, or friends' places. Boredom and the drudgery of everyday life often characterized the type of social activities the young women engaged in. With little or no money, they found excitement and adventure in routine activities, such as hanging out, listening to music, playing cards or board games, watching television, renting movies, going to clubs or concerts, getting drunk, or smoking weed. The following three accounts are representative of their social interactions. Here is Allison's description of her social activities:

I don't do that many activities. The most I can say I do is we come to the drop-in a lot. We go downtown and we chill. That's the main thing in the summer we do. Everyone's at the square. But lately, we just chill at home and watch movies and listen to music. That's pretty much what we do. (Allison, personal communication, January 20, 2001)

Next comes Gabrielle's account of what she does for entertainment in her spare time:

As a group, we go out for coffee a lot to [a local diner]. That is our hang out. We go there and, like, spend four hours there. And we're just drinking coffee. We'll have like eight cups of coffee, you know. We'll draw and we'll write and we'll play cards, you know. We'll discuss such varying topics, man.... We get into such deep

topics that sometimes that it just goes right over my head. But it's interesting, you know. You learn a lot from the people you hang around with. So coffee is a big thing. We like to go to clubs ...we do that a lot. We go there and it's good music and great fun and lots of people. (Gabrielle, personal communication, February 9, 2001)

Finally, here is how Frances spends a typical day:

Yeah, I've got a group of maybe, like, nine people who show up at my house and sit there with me mostly all day, everyday. We just chill and smoke weed and relax and do whatever. We come downtown sometimes. I don't come down here half as much as I used to; it's too cold and it's boring. That's why I'm looking for a job. I need something better to do with my days than just sitting around my house and smoking weed. (Frances, personal communication, February 4, 2001)

The young women's friendships with other females were sometimes tenuous relationships that tended to shift over time. Consistent with the notion that connections with males are of greater value than connections with females, half of the young women placed more importance on their friendships with male counterparts. Allison's case was typical. She noted, "Most of [my friends] are males because I don't get along with many females. But the females that I do get along with, there's three of them" (Allison, personal communication, January 20, 2001).

For Carol, the picture was quite similar:

They're mostly males.... Girls, like I only have, like, three girls, like, girls that I can actually stand, that I can sit with and chill with. Most girls I can only stand for an hour and a half and then I say, "Okay, see you later. I gotta go." I don't like girls much. I've always been like, when I came to the street, it was always guys. I was always hanging around with boys, always. Even in school, I was always, like, hung around with the boys, me and my friend, around all the guys. We like it that way, you know. I guess we're just different; we're not like the average girls. (Carol, personal communication, January 24, 2001)

Take also the case of Frances, for instance:

I've got more guy friends than I do females. I find it hard to get along with, like, not all females, like; I do have a number of female friends. But I find it so much easier to get along with guys than chicks. I don't know why, I just do. There's some chicks that just piss me off really fast and I'm just like, "Go away." (Frances, personal communication, February 4, 2001)

Over time, the young women's friends became their home and family. What the young women sought from their affiliations with peer groups was companionship, acceptance, popularity, an individual identity, a source of personal safety, and a surrogate family. However, many of their friends too often let them down. Ironically, if anyone came to help out during difficult times, it was usually members of their primary family. Seven young women said they could count on either their mother or father or both. Dorothy describes her social support network as follows:

My mom, she's always been there for me. Like, she's never left my side when I was at the group home.... My mom, like, she's been there in the group home, in the shelter, and when I was on the streets. She took me in, like, from the hospital a couple of times and she never left my side. (Dorothy, personal communication, January 24, 2001)

In a similar fashion, Heln turns to her mother when she requires assistance.

I can count on my mom for just about anything. Even though I don't, I've had lots of problems with my mom. We used to fight all the time. We still fight most of the time, but I know if I ever needed her for anything she would always, always be there. (Heln, personal communication, February 11, 2001)

Carol's description was also typical. She says her parents know her better than the friends she hangs out with:

My mom and dad, number one, for sure. Ever since I've left their house the last time, we have an understanding that I'm on my own now. It's not like running away, it's not doing anything, it's that I'm on my own because I'm on my own. And, so it's good. But it's for sure my parents over anything 'cause my parents know me. Like my friends know me, but they don't know me. But my parents, they know me. (Carol, personal communication, January 24, 2001)

On the other hand, Allison recounts a somewhat different account of her social support network.

The person, no, the people I count on the most is the drop-in. I really don't have family. My friends are good people. But a lot of them are addicted to drugs and alcohol and they can't always be there. I know the drop-in is gonna be here and they're gonna be open. So I come here to talk to people about anything because I know they're gonna be here. Besides my own place, this is my home. (Allison, personal communication, January 20, 2001)

While Allison is receiving professional support, the inclusion of staff at the drop-in or the shelter underscores the lack of close, meaningful relationships. Allison has, in effect, substituted a pseudo family for a lack of support and unavailable close contact in her emotional sphere. Gilfus (1988) found similar patterns in the childhoods of women in prison. She stated, "Themes of violence, neglect, loneliness and loss echo through nearly every interview I conducted" (p. 135).

In conclusion, the accounts of these young women's lives reveal many similarities. For the most part, the young women's family environments were highly unstable and consisted of abandonment, separation, divorce, and Children's Aid Societies (CAS) intervention. Parental alcoholism and drug addiction and high degrees of family violence and child abuse also characterized family life. Relationships with parents or stepparents and siblings were

oftentimes strained. Most of the young women told of how they had problems communicating with one or both of their parents. The nature of the young women's family environments fostered and reinforced low self-worth and a painful sense of alienation. Motivated by family discord and unrest, many of the young women directly linked their violent tempers and behaviour to their family situations.

Outside their homes, the young women talked about their peers and described their social support network. The young women faced many dilemmas with their peers. In seeking recognition and popularity, the young women engaged in violent behaviours in hopes of enhancing their status with peer groups. Forced to cope with family disharmony as well as physical and sexual victimization, the young women adapted to their dysfunctional environment at tremendous costs to themselves. Many of the young had been physically abused and, in several cases, sexually abused. They resorted to alcohol and other drugs as a form of self-medication, which may have led them to their becoming involved in violence and other delinquent activities. As we shall see in the next chapter, their violent behaviours may puzzle us until we understand their circumstances.

CHAPTER 6

Situating Young Women's Violent Behaviour

To this end, I have focused on the young women's journey into violence and the effect that their interactions with school, family, histories of abuse, peers, and alcohol and other drugs have had on their decisions to engage in violence. Once confronted with a situation, however, the young women were faced with certain options about whether or not to use violence.

Therefore, in this chapter, I explore with the young women the circumstances that motivated their decision to participate in violence and their emotional responses to the violence. In addition, I look at other factors, such as elements of planning, use of force or weapons, and whether drugs and economic motivations came to dominate the events. I also examine young women's perceptions of being identified (by themselves or others) as violent and the impact that their actions have had on them. Finally, I attempt to gain insight into the young women's moral judgments with regard to the use of violence. Through the accounts that the young women provided, we hear how they describe violence and explain their involvement in violent behaviour.

Defining Violence

Like all criminal and delinquent events, engaging in violence encompasses a very wide range of disparate activities. In speaking with the young women, I asked each young woman to describe what she considered to be violent activities. All of the young women relayed incidents of physical assault. Others included descriptions of verbal and emotional abuse.

Interestingly, none of the young women mentioned sexual assault or harassment. Brenda's account was typical of the group of young women:

Violence is either, for me, physically or verbally or mentally. Verbally and mentally are like the same basically. There's different ways that violence can occur, I guess, such as like say how "you're a fucking bitch." That could hurt somebody verbally and mentally and I think that's violence as well. Also hitting somebody and continuing hitting somebody, that's violence. (Brenda, personal communication, January 24, 2001)

Here is Gabrielle's conception of violence:

Violence is a negative energy towards something or someone. And it can be physical or it can be verbal; that's how I see it. Most of the time people think violence is physical because they hear violent acts and it's usually like murder or like abuse. (Gabrielle, personal communication, February 9, 2001)

Carol provides a somewhat vivid description of violence:

Violence is like hitting people, having attitude, attacking people, kicking the crap out of people, talking back to people, all that. You see lots of it on the street. So that's how you learn.... You get your own way when you're violent, you know. (Carol, personal communication, January 24, 2001)

Allison, like Carol, also sees violence as a way of getting what you want:

Violence to me ... [t]here's a lot of fighting. It could be verbal violence or it could be physical violence. A lot of the violence that I see, and from my own personal experience, it's physical violence. And sometimes, to me, that's the only way you can get across to people is going to that length. (Allison, personal communication, January 20, 2001)

Finally, Elizabeth perceives violence as an easy way out of life:

I see violence as a way to get outta life. I guess you fight people because you wanna be like cool and everything.... But I think violence is just a way to get outta life, to get outta consequences, to get outta talking to people, to get outta communicating, to get outta of, like, you know, having to face someone or something. (Elizabeth, personal communication, January 26, 2001)

As these young women's descriptions of violence illustrate, there is diversity in the language employed to describe those who exhibit violent behaviours. In addition, the young women described highly diversified activities, ranging in severity from having attitude or calling people hurtful names to major offenses, such as physical attacks or murder. As we shall see next, however, the young women chose mainly to use violence to protect themselves.

Motivations to Use Violence

Upon initiation into violent offending, some of the young women in the study stated that they became involved for adventure, excitement, thrills, and, at times, social interaction. Brenda's account was typical of a "social" activity, which provoked an action/reaction type of response amongst her peers:

I remember this one time, where I'd hang around with these five girls and they're all very tough, they're tough girls. Some girl, I was drinking and when I tend to drink I get very mouthy and violent, mouthy more like it. And it was more them not me, but I was a part of it. And this girl said, "You have to start the fight and pour all this orange juice on this girl." And I did it and I poured the orange juice on this girl. And the girl hit me and I hit her back. And then, the other five girls started beating up on her and I just stood out of the way. But I was the one that started the whole fight, just to start something, for some chaos I guess. (Brenda, personal communication, January 24, 2001)

While the young women's desire for peer recognition may have formed the basis for their initial participation in violent behaviour, their subsequent involvement was of a different nature. Later, the young women talked about committing violence in order to command respect. Anderson (1994) loosely defines respect "as being treated 'right,' or granted the deference one deserves" (p. 82). For Allison, the desire for respect formed the basis of her violent actions. She explains:

There's been times that I'd be walking down the street and somebody would give me a dirty look. And that person had better run. Everyone knows that. In Hamilton, for instance, there was this one time I was with a couple of friends walking down the main street and somebody gave me a dirty look. I don't know why, but I always take offence to these things. So I started calling on this guy and saying, "Come on you guy, why are you giving me a dirty look?" And just out of the blue, I punched him. The guy wouldn't fight back so I let it go. You know, violence works in many different ways. (Allison, personal communication, January 20, 2001)

We know little about the effects that situational factors have had on young women's participation in violent behaviour. What we do know, however, is that violence is a progression of increasingly more intrusive events. Research (Artz, 1998; Campbell, 1984b; Felson & Steadman, 1983) has shown this to develop in three distinct phases. First, there is a verbal confrontation in which individual identities are denigrated. The second stage usually involves some form of threat or evasive action. The third step necessitates physical attack, which is the ultimate retaliatory sanction.

This was certainly the case for some of the young women interviewed. The change in process is revealed in the accounts of Carol and Dorothy. As Carol stated:

I got into a fight with a girl in the group home, too. I used to fight with the girls.... I lived with her; this was the second time.... And, I wasn't planning on doing anything, but then one day she told me to shut up. And I just flipped out. Like, I grabbed her and I knocked her against the wall and grabbed her by her hair. I grabbed her and shook her. I didn't punch her in the face. I didn't punch her once. Like, I just grabbed onto her and I was knocking her.... For three days, she stood, like, there was a downstairs and there was an upstairs. I moved upstairs and she moved downstairs. She stood at the stairway; the staff was always there with her because she was freaking out. She was freaking out all the time, "Man, get your ass down here." So I'd come out the door and say, "Come and get me." She'd move and the staff would grab her. I'd say,

"What's wrong, you can't come and get me." (Carol, personal communication, January 24, 2001)

Dorothy provided this account:

[My sister and I], we were having an argument over I forget what.... But I remember my sister sitting down and swinging her legs back and forth. When she was doing this, she was kicking me at the same time. I kept telling her to back off, but she didn't. So I jumped on her and clung to her neck and started gouging at her eyes. My mom came to the rescue and jumped in between us and separated us.... Now, me and her barely ever talk 'cause, well, we don't get along. (Dorothy, personal communication, January 24, 2001)

In other accounts, three of the young women elaborated on physical fights that took place between their mothers and themselves. In dispute-related violence, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between the aggressor and the victim. In these instances, Baskin and Sommers (1998) identify a quasi-adversarial relationship between the competing parties. This is suggested due to the frequent contacts they may have and, particularly so, if one or both of the parties have a history of resolving differences through the threat or use of violence. In support of this, Gabrielle relates the details of the physical fight in which she struck her mother:

[I]t was about a year ago, and my mom still has a scar from it. I was really mad at her. Well, I'm manic-depressive and I have anger management control problems underneath, underlying everything else, and anxiety disorders. So I have a lot going on in my head; not that that's an excuse, just that's what built up to it; that was the catalyst. And then my mom, she wouldn't let me go out to see [my boyfriend] and [he] is my support beam, you know. Like, he was depressive as well and he knows where I'm coming from, so he's my support. And she wouldn't let me go out when I really needed him. So I just flipped out and it got that she was yelling at me and I was yelling at her. And she was swearing at me; I swore back at her. And then, I just out of the blue, I punched her.... Like, she fell, she was outside on the steps and it was, like,

wintertime. Like, she fell down against the wall. Like I'm a small person, but I know how to punch because I took, like, lessons and stuff.... I don't know what happened because I didn't see her after that. I left and I didn't go back home.... I don't think she needed stitches, but she was bleeding.... And she's still; her nose is now, like, really fucked up. Like, she's got a scar on it from it. (Gabrielle, personal communication, February 9, 2001)

Elizabeth, too, became involved in a physical fight with her mother. She explains:

I hit my mom once.... She was just screaming at me for some reason 'cause she was mad. Like, I don't know what was wrong with her; I don't really remember. But, I don't know what the circumstances were; we just got into a fight.... I dunno, she was screaming at me and screaming at me and it got really bad and that. She was pushing me around and I hit her.... That's when she kicked me out. (Elizabeth, personal communication, January 26, 2001)

In Gabrielle and Elizabeth's accounts, it appears that the young women's mothers may also have used aggressive actions, indicating that the victims in some way contributed to the outcome. However, the mothers' actions were not portrayed as aggressive as the young women's were. According to Baskin and Sommers (1998), victims appear to use less physical force and tend to engage more often in evasive actions.

Still, in other descriptions, many of the young women perceived their use of violence as a form of vengeance for a previous wrongdoing against them. Fleeing from such a situation would undermine a young woman's self-esteem and respect in the eyes of her opponent and peers. Therefore, by retaliating or standing up for oneself after an assault on their person, the young women "saved face." Allison's account was typical:

It was a couple of years ago when I was living in Hamilton. I got into a fight with another female because she lied to me. I don't know what triggered my mind and I ended up beating her up.... It happened when she lied to me and I can't stand someone lying to me. So I kind of jumped her and that's how it happened.... She got the worst of it.... She was hurt really bad. Yeah, after the fight, me and another person ended up taking her to the hospital. It sounds really funny, but we did; I took her to the hospital. She had a couple of broken bones, but she was fine.... Yep, the police got involved, but it was all good. The other female didn't charge me. So I got off with no charges because she didn't press charges.... We became really good friends afterwards. So it all turned out good in the end. (Allison, personal communication, January 20, 2001)

A common thread running throughout the young women's interviews is that they used violence to avoid being "dissed," that is, disgraced or disrespected. When other legitimate sources are denied, asserting oneself in violence is necessary. Anderson (1994) sees it as an attempt to control other people's knowledge and opinions about a young woman's behaviour or those close to her, such as her friends or her mother. He maintains that this experience is typical of the conflicts of young women living in inner-city communities.

According to Anderson (1994), a major cause of conflicts among young women is "he say, she say," which is essentially a form of group gossiping. This practice often begins in primary school years and continues through high school. It occurs when young women talk about others, therefore bringing their affairs to the streets. Typically, a young woman says something negative about another friend in the group, usually behind the person's back. The remark circulates and eventually makes it back to the person talked about. To avenge the "dissing,"

the young woman must defend herself or risk being challenged or moved on by other members of the group. This was certainly the case for Dorothy:

I remember in school one time, my friend dissed my mom. Nobody disses my mom, no one.... So, she was my good friend; like, we went to school together, from elementary school, you know. I'm like, "What the fuck did you say?" And she said it again. And I'm like, "Okay bitch, you're meeting me outside right now." She did everything to try to get out of it. She apologized completely; she was like, "I'm sorry." So like everybody backs down. She like backed down. She, like, got some other friends to talk to me and, like, say that she was sorry. (Dorothy, personal communication, January 24, 2001)

While a physical fight did not occur, to maintain her self-respect and honour amongst her peers, Dorothy must show she is not someone to be "dissed." This involves in part her self-image, which is shaped by what she thinks other people are thinking of her in relation to her peers.

In pursuit of respect and honour or to save face and pride, some young women may choose an aggressive approach when the situation requires it, therefore acting out their own rendering of "manhood." As determined by Anderson (1994), "manhood" and respect are attained through the display of "nerve" (p. 92). Taking the possessions of others, including someone else's girlfriend or boyfriend, getting in someone's face, or throwing the first punch shows nerve. It can also occur when another person's sense of honour is taken away, as was the case with Janice. This action provoked Janice to challenge a young woman who cheated on her best friend. Janice talks about her display of "nerve":

I punched out a girl because she cheated on my best friend. I was pretty pissed off because she did it in a really bad way.... I was pissed off over what she did 'cause this was, like, a good friend of

mine. It pissed me off a lot. He was feeling really shitty. He really, really liked her and she pretty much played with him and said fuck off, you know. And that pissed me off, so I was mad.... I punched her in the head a couple of times and she was bleeding. I don't remember from where, but I know she was bleeding.... She had a swollen eye and her jaw was, like, all swollen.... We just had the fight and went our ways. I saw her the next day. And my friend ended up punching her out again; I didn't touch her. I already did it the day before, so I wasn't gonna do it again; it was bad enough. But my friend, she went on and did it for some reason, I dunno. Somebody paid her to do it 'cause there was a bunch of people who didn't like this girl. I guess I kinda took the role, you know, to go start it and then everybody just kinda followed and picked on her pretty much. (Janice, personal communication, March 11, 2001)

The young women's accounts reveal they felt compelled to seek revenge because of assaults on their personal integrity or that of a friend or a family member. It is evident that the young women's personal identities, self-respect, and honour are intricately linked to the way they perform on the streets and their peers' outlook of them following such confrontations. Clearly, this attitude reflects the limited opportunities and the oppressed nature of these young women's lives. Generally, young women from more supportive and emotionally connected families have other ways of soliciting respect and status and, therefore, do not feel obliged to participate in such physical displays of violence for validation.

Occasionally, the young women with whom I spoke engaged in violence out of jealousy. Brenda's displays of jealousy and violence were for the purpose of social control. Brenda stated her motivation was to get her boyfriend to do what she wanted:

My ex-boyfriend, we went out for two months and he was never violent to me. When we got into fights, I would beat on him. Like, there's like he'd have big welts on his arms. And he said, like, "I'm

sick of this" and we just broke up.... I guess it was jealousy and not knowing what he was doing or who he was on the phone with, just that, very jealous. I think that's it. Very controlling as well. If he didn't do what I told him to do, I'd get angry at him. If things didn't go my way, I'd get angry at him. Like, he'd push my buttons. He's never touched me. Like, he's grabbed me and said, "Stop it, what are you doing?" That's about it. (Brenda, personal communication, January 24, 2001)

Carol, too, used violence because of her jealousy. Carol described one incident that happened when she was living on the streets in Ottawa:

There was once incident in the market with this girl. And this was when I was thirteen and I had that boyfriend when we lived on the street. And she went up to my boyfriend and she said, "I'll suck your dick for a dime [of hash], man." I'm laughing and I'm like what's she doing. But it got me so mad. I grabbed her and dragged her through the market by her pigtails and grabbed her and dragged her down all these stairwells. I beat the shit outta her, I kicked her so hard; I kicked her and kicked her and kicked her. And I didn't stop, I didn't stop, I didn't stop. But this lady came down the stairs and she got to the bottom and she stopped 'cause she was on the phone and she was calling the cops. And I wouldn't stop. I was, like, kicking her and kicking her, smashing her head, grabbing her by the hair. My boyfriend grabbed me and he picked me up and we ran.... My boyfriend took me and we ran and ran all the way 'til we left the whole market. We left the market for a couple of hours 'cause we knew the lady was calling the cops.... Obviously, I didn't want to get busted 'cause of the shit you know and stuff like that and 'cause I was still a runaway. Like I didn't need the cops near me 'cause I would've went to jail. They put you in jail for thirty days 'cause I'm with the CAS. I was, like, I'm not going to jail for thirty days plus another thirty days for assault and all that. So I said screw that; so I just took off.... After, I was, like, what the hell happened. What a stupid whore. It got me mad. I didn't know what I was doing. (Carol, personal communication, January 24, 2001)

In addition to jealousy, the theme of interpersonal violence was an important situational component in the young women's interviews. Again, Carol talks about one incident that happened when she was living in Vancouver:

When I was in Vancouver, I had a boyfriend and he was on heroin and he was all fucked up. And we'd just get into fights and we'd argue with each other we'd get so mad at each other 'cause we were both really screwed up. At first, we'd just throw stuff, and then, it'd be shots and then there would be, like, bad punches and stuff like that. I remember an instance where he wanted to go out and get money for his dope and I was like no, no, no, no. I was, like, we're gonna get money soon. My friend was coming over and we could borrow money off her. And, he freaked out saying, "Fuck you." I was, like, whoa, man. And we got into a fight.... I hit him first.... [We were] punching, kicking each other, like, throwing, I didn't throw anything. [I was] grabbing his hair, kicking him in the nuts. Then it was over and we just kinda sat down. He left and then he came back. (Carol, personal communication, January 24, 2001)

In the youth culture, a person who is believed capable of taking care of oneself is accorded certain deference (Anderson, 1994). Looking capable of taking care of one's property and her person, as a form of self-defense was also a dominant theme among the young women interviewed. For the young women, self-defense implies a predisposition to violence and signals to her opponent that she is capable of violence when the circumstances call for it. First, we turn to Dorothy and Frances, who spoke of incidents in which they tried to protect their personal property. Here is what Dorothy had to say:

The recent one was what got me kicked out of the Y.... I had an argument with one of the staff so I got kicked out for five days. He said if I didn't screw up I was allowed to come back after four days. And they also said ... it was all right if I came back ... every day ... 'cause I had pets in my room. And I didn't wanna let anyone else to take care of them.... So I came back on the third day, this was like twelve o'clock at night.... I just wanted to drop off most of my stuff and feed my pets and then go to my mom's and then come back the next day. It seemed logical. But staff pinned my door so I couldn't get in. And, well, I was already tired and I was gonna miss my bus and I wanted to go to my mom's. Like I told the staff, "You pinned my door ... I wanna go and feed my pets and drop my stuff." The staff said, "Let me read your file...." She's like taking her sweet assed time and that was really getting me annoyed. And

then I started to swear.... I'm not gonna walk to my mom's, it's almost an hour walk, you know. Then she's like, telling me to calm down and telling me to go talk to her.... So I got really angry and I called her a bitch and I said fuck this. I go to use the elevator; she won't let me out. She put the elevators out of service, both of them. And then I start really flipping out.... So I took the stairs. She starts like yelling at me, like, "Come up from the stairs or I'm calling the cops...." She came up with another staff.... So the staff calls the cops. She told them this really large bullshit story.... And, of course, from grown-ups point of view, instead of like teenagers like mine, they're obviously gonna take theirs since she talked to them on the phone by herself.... I didn't know what she said; of course, I figured out what she said ... she's drunk, she's violent, she's flipping out. ...[T]he cops came up ... they had three guys. I tried to use reason and said, "Just let me put my stuff in my room. You can watch me feed my pets." The cops were saying, "Well, she wants you outta here. Let's go." I was, like, "I wanna feed my pets and I don't trust anybody with my pets." The cops said, "She'll feed them." I said, "No, I can do it myself. It's my room. I pay rent...." So they're like, "Come on, let's go." I have like five bags so obviously, this is gonna take some time and I need to put my coat on. Like, it maybe would've taken like two minutes to get it all. The cops are like, "Forget it, you're arrested." So like I said, "No, you're not arresting me." ...[W]e had this little struggle. And they're like, "You're under arrest for resisting arrest...." And then we struggled some more. And I wasn't getting any calmer. And then, they had to pepper spray me. That didn't help me. And so finally, they had to like choke me and they dragged me to the elevator and they dragged me to the car. Once I was in the car, they didn't know what the hell to do with me 'cause obviously I wasn't drunk so they couldn't take me to the drunk tank. So they just dropped me to my mom's. And then the next day, the boss lady at the Y said that I was way too crazy last night. And she was taking the side of the other staff and then she told me to leave. (Dorothy, personal communication, January 24, 2001)

Frances, too, describes an incident that happened to her in Vancouver, in which she tried to guard her belongings:

There was once in Vancouver. I was staying at a squat and this chick, I caught her trying to leave the squat with my backpack on and half of my, like, my clothes in it. And that's everything I own. I was like, "What are you doing, man?" ...[T]he squat is a parking garage and we'd broke into the electrical room and we were sleeping in there.... [T]here was a little level where people used to

just sit and chat. And she was sitting up there and she was packing, like, some other people's things into my bag that she tried to steal and she was gonna leave with. And I walked up and I saw her and I said, "What are you doing, man?" She was like, "Oh, I'm going to Quebec...." And, we were in Vancouver, right. She said, "Oh, I'm hitchhiking down to Quebec...." I'm like, "With my stuff, no you're not." She was like, "This isn't yours." I'm like, "Man, my mother bought me that bag, like, the day I left. I know what my bag looks like." She was just like, "Oh, maybe I got the same one." I'm like; "You can't even get them out here, man. We got it in Ottawa...." I got my bag back and I took all my stuff, like I made sure all my stuff was still in it and I was about to walk away and then she was like, "Well, I don't even have a bag." And I had another backpack so I gave her another backpack just, like, to be nice, you know. I don't want her hitchhiking across the country with nothing, you know. So I gave her a backpack and I put my stuff down to give her this backpack and she starts throwing my things into the bag again, like, right in front of me. ...[I] was pissed. She was, like, putting my shit into a bag that I just gave her after I caught her trying to steal my shit. And, she was trying to steal it again right in front of my face. Man, that really pissed me off a lot 'cause that was everything I owned and she was trying to take it on me. Yeah, that was horrible, man.... I was just watching her putting my stuff into this bag so I, like, I dunno, I made her look at me in the eyes and I just gave her a backhand 'cause I didn't, like, I didn't actually beat her up. I only gave her that one backhand and my friend gave her a backhand, too. And I would've kicked the crap out of her, but there was, like, in that place in the squat where we were standing, it's because, like, we weren't even supposed to be in that parking garage, it was, like, abandoned, condemned, or whatever. And there was some Oriental people across the road having a cigarette and they were, like, looking right at us. So I didn't want the cops to be called on our squat so I didn't beat her up. But, like, I gave her a good smack and she had a cut right, like, there [on her cheek]. Yep, from one of my rings, I think. (Frances, personal communication, February 4, 2001)

Next, we will hear from Carol and Isabelle, who spoke about the importance of being able to take care of oneself when the situation requires it. As Carol makes clear, the nature of violence is largely determined by the demands of the circumstances. She explains:

There was another time in Vancouver, we were all moving to Vancouver and, we, me and my friend, got into a truck with two guys. And one guy was trying to hit on my friend. She said, "No, stop the truck" and they wouldn't stop it. So, there was the driver, and I grabbed the knife and I went right up to the driver's neck [to the jugular vein] and I said, "Stop the fucking truck." And they were Pakistan and, like, they didn't even know how to speak English. And they were screaming to each other. I was like, "Stop the truck" and they wouldn't stop it. I would never slit somebody's throat; I would never do it. And then they wouldn't even stop it. She jumped out of the moving truck down the highway; she jumped out of it. And then, I jumped out of it 'cause she jumped out of it. That was bad. Yeah, we didn't get the license; we jumped into a ditch.... There was snow, like; there was shit loads of snow in the ditch.... And we just sat there for about two minutes. We had to keep going. And this couple stopped and they saw us jump out of the truck and they stopped and said, "Are you guys okay?" We were like, "No." Yeah, do we look okay jumping out of a truck? And the guy said, "Okay, I'll give you a ride to the closest place." So he checked us. And I was like, "Yeah, I do [have a knife]." It was like a couple, so I said here's my knife. And he brought us to the next truck stop. My friend was more frightened, like, she was the one that was scared. Like I had to be not scared for her sake 'cause if I started getting scared, she would've like freaked out, you know. (Carol, personal communication, January 24, 2001)

For Isabelle, constant harassment around her lesbian identity formed the basis of her violent actions. As Isabelle related:

There was one day where I was really violent. I was at Bayshore mall. I was walking and I was with my partner. I had crutches because I sprained my ankle.... I was turning around the corner and someone pushed me. So I grabbed my crutch and smashed it right over their back.... Oh yeah, I knew this person. This person has been the same person that has picked on me for twelve years now.... This person was following me on the bus. I got off the bus and went into Bayshore and she kept on following me.... I was like, "I'm getting sick of you guys fucking picking on me all the time, you know. If you fucking hit me again, I'm gonna hit you again, hit you again, hit you again...." Security knew that I didn't start it 'cause they were always picking on me 'cause I was crying. My partner was, like, telling me to calm down. She was kicking them too, and I was trying to, like, hold on to her. She was trying to kick the other girl because the other girl pushed [my partner] in the back of the head. She literally pushed her head. I don't find it's fair, like, you

know, why can't people just leave us alone.... I was scared because I thought someone was gonna do something to us, you know. Every time I go somewhere with my partner, we always have to turn around, you know. We always have to look behind our backs because in case someone comes after us. (Isabelle, personal communication, February 26, 2001)

Lesbian women and gay men have historically been targets for pervasive societal discrimination and oppression. Western culture is predicated upon an assumption of heterosexuality as both the norm and as the most "desirable" form of sexual expression. Consequently, lesbian women have a double set of discriminations, as women and as lesbians, with which to cope. One of the major tasks with which lesbian women must deal is the development of their lesbian identity. In fact, "coming out" to others may complicate all other issues and lead toward violence. As we have seen in Isabelle's circumstances, self-disclosure made her vulnerable to additional harm from her peers.

As the personal narratives of these young women confirm, the choice of violence as a means of having fun, commanding respect, solving disputes, and seeking revenge, or as a way of self-defense or social control, fits with the oppressed nature of their lives, in general. Given the family and community context in which these young women were socialized and the kinds of problems, conflicts, and dilemmas that the young women confronted from day to day, it was not surprising to find that their use of violence was commonplace in the overlapping social networks in which these young women participated.

"Payback is a Bitch"

Violence was also a feature of the young women's lives on the streets. As some of the young women discovered, there are no guarantees against

challenges, because there are always people around looking "to payback." The young women spoke of incurring severe beatings at the hands of their peers, brutal intimidation, and being threatened with knives or guns. Brenda, who has already shared with us her adventure where she poured orange juice on a young woman, talks about "payback":

...[A] couple weeks after that I ended getting beaten up by three girls. The girl that I poured the orange juice on, she had her three friends and, I got beaten up by them because I started the fight. So I ended up getting my ass kicked because of them. Well, what happened was I was staying at my friend's house at the time and, well, these guys set me up. And then, well, so and so is waiting for you in the back of Staples on Bank Street. Like I was drinking a lot that time and so I started walking to the back of Staples and these two girls jumped me. I fought back for a while and then, I guessed they kinda knocked me out. And I woke up in the snow and I was all full of blood. And then I ended going back to the group home crying.... I got to the group home and they looked at me and they're really, like, shocked.... My face was all, like, beat up. It was really bad.... And they sent me to bed and then at five o'clock in the morning the cops came and took me and brought me to jail ... for breaching a probation. I stayed [in a detention centre] for three months because I was on the run for six.... Yeah, it was pretty frightening. And after that incident, I didn't pick any fights, except for that time with my boyfriend. That's about it 'cause I guess I learned my lesson. Payback is a bitch. (Brenda, personal communication, January 24, 2001)

Here, Allison describes another encounter involving payback:

I got my ass kicked by three guys and a girl with crowbars and beer bottles. And I was living on the street at this time.... What happened was, a couple of days before that incident, me and my friend had beat up this girl because she had pulled a knife out on my friend. She wasn't one of the four that beat us up; she was another one. And we beat her up because she pulled a knife out on my friend. That's why we got beat up. You gotta fucking watch it.... So after all that happened, me and my friend got beat down for about half an hour. They decided to beat on us for quite some time.... So, that being my first time being beaten up with weapons it was, I went into shock when it started happening, so I couldn't really feel what was happening to me, so I was lucky for that....

They tore ligaments in my neck and my back, so I had a really bad back and I still do from that incident. They shaved half of my head [with a razor], so I had to shave all of my hair off. My face was badly bruised and cut up.... I had to stay in bed for a week. My friend, she was smaller than me and a bit younger than me, luckily she didn't get it that bad. She got her head shaved and a couple of kicks here and there, but she was fine. So, she was lucky.... So after that happened, I had no where to live as I was living on the street and I ended up going to a shelter because I was beat down. To me, it wasn't that bad but I looked that bad. So it was pretty rough. I started walking around and I ended up walking by a shelter and the staff was outside and they knew me so they called me in and took me to the hospital.... But, I didn't know that, a couple of days later I was in a lot of pain, but it didn't stop me because I kept on coming back for more. (Allison, personal communication, January 20, 2001)

The personal accounts of Brenda and Allison illustrate the uncertainty of results when using violence as a tool to further their objectives. The young women acknowledge that outcomes are usually short-term in situations like this. Allison points to this reality when she stated, "When you think you're all big and bad and you decide to jump on someone, you better hope you're big and bad" (Allison, personal communication, January 20, 2001). This statement obviously alludes to situations where the victim can turn around and become the aggressor in a "payback" scenario.

Emotional Dimensions of Violence

According to Katz (1988), people are drawn to violence by the emotional dimensions of participating in violent behaviour. The author contends that the aggressor makes a choice to physically attack his or her victim based on an assumption that the victim is the cause of the aggressor's anger. This creates a heightened sense of excitement and fuels certain emotions in the aggressor, such as frustration, humiliation, shame, hurt, and anger. Katz states that all of

these emotions call for a need to remedy a supposed imbalance of power (pp. 4-11).

In explaining their use of violence, the young women identified similar emotions. For them, being humiliated, put down, dissed, or threatened called for displays of anger were justification for their actions and served as warnings of imminent physical confrontation. According to Anderson (1994), the issue of respect is at the heart of the youth culture. He maintains that respect, especially among the younger population, is viewed as more or less "an external entity that is hard-won but easily lost, and so must constantly be guarded" (p. 82).

In describing their emotional responses to their violent behaviour, the young women conveyed feelings of excitement and unrest. They talked about the "highs" and adrenaline rushes they experienced during physical confrontations. The young women also described the frustration, anger, and rage they felt toward their victims. Furthermore, they alluded to the importance of having power over and taking their anger out on the victims who had caused their displeasure in the first place. As Allison stated, "It gave me an advantage to where I could get what I want and I could do what I want and nobody is gonna step in my way because of that fact. So I started to enjoy it and it became a power to me" (Allison, personal communication, January 20, 2001).

Gabrielle describes the emotions that took place when she hit her mother:

I was just very mad at her. It was like white rage. I just, I felt like she deserved to be hit. I felt like she didn't know where I was coming from. She didn't understand me. No matter how much I tried to talk to her, it would just go in one ear and out the next. You know, like, it was selective hearing with her. She didn't like to

believe a lot of the things I said. (Gabrielle, personal communication, February 9, 2001)

Here, Allison talks about experiencing a "rush" during the fight in which a young woman had lied to her:

During the fight, I don't remember much.... I blacked out and I don't remember much of what I do.... You get a big rush and after a while you start to like that rush. And it just becomes bigger and bigger and you don't really think of what's going on, you're just doing it. And to me, I'm at the point I don't think I have feelings. (Allison, personal communication, January 20, 2001)

Brenda also describes living through "a big rush" when she poured orange juice on a young woman. She explains:

Well, I had a big rush. It was a rush, yep. My adrenaline was flowing. And then, I can't remember my feelings towards it. I just thought, like, I gotta get out of here basically. (Brenda, personal communication, January 24, 2001)

Elizabeth, another young woman I spoke with, recounts her emotions following an incident in which she smashed her principal's car with a baseball bat and sprayed paint all over it after the principal had informed her of his intentions to expel her from school for low grades. As Elizabeth related, she felt:

Anger and rage and frustration.... I got really pissed off at him and I just, that's what I did, I broke his car 'cause I was, like, so mad at him. So I took a baseball and broke his car.... So I was very happy.... But I just went home. I just left 'cause I didn't want to get involved and I didn't want to get into trouble.... And then I felt scared 'cause I thought he was gonna call the cops on me. Thank God, he didn't even call the cops on me. All the emotions stuck together. (Elizabeth, personal communication, January 26, 2001)

While fighting may evoke emotions, such as frustration and anger, it also made one young woman feel anxious and sick. Here is what Janice had to say

about her emotions when she punched out a young woman for cheating on her best friend:

I was pissed off over what she did 'cause this was, like, a good friend of mine.... I was mad. I was really anxious 'cause my stomach gets really, like, I don't feel too good when I'm fighting, you know. It doesn't feel good inside. My stomach gets all tight and I feel like I'm gonna get sick sometimes.... Everything is going so fast, you don't really have time to think or feel anything 'cause you're paying attention to what you're doing. (Janice, personal communication, March 11, 2001)

While the young women talked about experiencing anger, rage, excitement, and adrenaline rushes during their violent outbursts, they also displayed feelings of guilt, remorse, and shock following their violent interactions.

Here is what Brenda had to say following the fight with her ex-boyfriend:

[I felt] a lot of guilt; shamed of the way I was carrying myself because I thought I was this rock and tough girl and I was masking me to be a bigger person than I thought I was. You know what I mean, like, I was masking all my feelings and the way I really am. I tried to act bigger. (Brenda, personal communication, January 24, 2001)

The accounts of Elizabeth and Gabrielle, where they struck their mothers, are typical and reveal similar emotions. As Elizabeth states:

I hit her by accident and I felt so bad.... I felt bad for hitting her. I felt, you know, so bad. I dunno, I felt so many things at the time, mostly bad, you know. I couldn't believe it.... So, I guess, it was kinda like, I dunno, I just wish it never happened. (Elizabeth, personal communication, January 26, 2001)

Gabrielle provided me with this account when asked what her feelings were immediately following the incident:

Shock that I actually laid a hand on my mother. That's one of the first times that I've done that and one of the few. I think I've only done it three times. And, I just, I couldn't believe it; that was the most severe incident. Afterwards, I was trying to explain it to [my

boyfriend], and I'm like, I don't even know what set it off, you know, just the fact that she wouldn't let me out of the house. And I couldn't deal with that. (Gabrielle, personal communication, February 9, 2001)

Carol relates her emotions after she pulled a knife on the two men who would not stop the truck for her and her friend to get out:

I was surprised, even at myself. Like, you know, I put it right up to him on his neck, right there [pointing to the jugular vein]. I was surprised, like, I took it out and I did that. It kind of surprised me.... I dunno how to describe feelings, but it was just like a shock. (Carol, personal communication, January 24, 2001)

Not all the young women, however, displayed feelings of guilt or remorse for their violent behaviour. For Allison, the demand for respect outweighed her actions. Allison describes her emotional response to the incident in which she punched out a guy because he gave her a dirty look:

I was really mad, I was really mad because he gave me a dirty look. And I think that that's what got me to that point. And I didn't feel guilty for that. ...[I] was just like, "Okay, well, you deserved it and that's what you get." (Allison, personal communication, January 20, 2001)

Once again, Carol relays her feelings following the incident in the group home in which she beat a young woman, who told her to shut up. Here is what she had to say:

It felt good, yep.... Good. Like, okay, it's over, man. There's nothing more; it's done. She knows how I feel and obviously, I know how she feels. It's just over.... She's such a stupid bitch, I hate her so much. It felt good because I whacked her head on the wall. And then my mom came and seen me that day. And I was just, like, to my mom, "Oh mom, I kicked her ass." It felt, like, good because it had finally happened. You know, this girl, I stuck pins in her bed. I stuck toothpaste in her toque and asked her to come tobogganing with me. She got it matted in her hair.... I was really mean to her, you know, but I never did anything. But, I dunno, I

dunno if she was wanting it to happen too or not, it just happened.
(Carol, personal communication, January 24, 2001)

If we listen to the emotional responses of the young women following their violent interactions, we can better understand the language and their predicaments. For the most part, we can hear echoes of emotions, such as "guilt," "shame," "bad," "shock," and "surprise." According to Artz (1994), the language or the words we choose to describe our experiences is fundamental to our understanding of that experience. Perhaps then, some of the young women are having second thoughts about their violent behaviour.

"I Don't Go Out Looking To Harm Somebody"

In most instances, the young women's violent interactions were typically unplanned and included no element of forethought. In fact, 93 per cent of the violent events involved no planning at all. The accounts of Dorothy and Janice are typical of the lack of planning that goes into such events. As Dorothy states:

I don't go out looking to harm somebody. Like if they wanna, if I get in a fight, you know, they have to throw the first punch. They wanna bring it, they bring it. Obviously, if they throw the first punch, I'll try not to, like, totally, like, harm them. But then you know, I'm just gonna be, if you don't hit me, if you wanna fight then fine. I'm not gonna go easy on you; I'm not gonna totally paralyze you. (Dorothy, personal communication, January 24, 2001)

Further, Janice elaborates on the absence of planning that went into the incident where a young woman cheated on her best friend. Her actions emerged from some sort of personal relationship with the victim:

It's not like I planned it or anything. My head just started thinking and then I just followed what I thought and that's what it led to. And that's what happened. It's not like I planned it or, you know, whatever, it's just one day and I snapped. And she pissed me off and I did it. (Janice, personal communication, March 11, 2001)

In addition, the young women frequently reported being under the influence of alcohol or other drugs when the event took place. Here, Frances describes one such encounter where she had been drinking:

Last year, you know how Electric Circus goes up to Parliament Hill every year for Winterlude, yeah, well, it was the night of Electric Circus and my boyfriend broke up with me.... [T]hat night, I believe I was drunk.... And, I was walking home and I was walking through that park where all the ice sculptures are. And, I was crying and crying and this chick and her friend just walked up to me and she said, "What's your problem? "Why are you crying?" Then she just started bitching at me for no reason. I didn't even know who she was.... I just started yelling at her. I'm like, "Man, leave me alone, man, you don't even know what my problems are. What are you doing, like, bitching at me because I'm crying?" I'm like, "Just leave me alone, let me do my own thing." And then she jumped on me.... And like, she jumped on me so, I dunno, I put her down.... [A]nd I just beat her up, I dunno . I went right off on her, man. I, like, cracked her head off the maze [of ice sculptures] and whatnot.... She wasn't bleeding or anything. She probably had a headache, but yeah. (Frances, personal communication, February 4, 2001)

Although the majority of the young women's violent actions were unplanned, the remaining 7 per cent did involve some element of forethought. Formulating a plan included thinking about whom to target and when to commit the action, which usually occurred anywhere from a few minutes to a couple of hours to several days before the actual event. Typically, these events involved retaliatory actions or false accusations. First, Gabrielle summarizes the limited rationality in terms of the planning of her incident:

Yeah, this year, it was in the summertime, I don't know exactly when, August or September. And, there was this acquaintance of mine and ... we ran up with him in the bar. And he had no place to stay so we said, "Okay, yeah, you can stay with us for a while, but not too long." So he came and stayed with us. And he just kind of took over our place.... So anyway, [my boyfriend] started a new job and he went away at six o'clock at night. And immediately after

he left, this guy, he tried to get me drunk and then he tried to rape me. And that freaked me out really badly because, I mean, I'm usually pretty tough. Like, people call me a German butch dyke just because I'm German and people think I'm scary 'cause of, like, my tendencies. But it's just a joke. But, I mean, I can't deal with that. Like, I've been actually raped before and it wasn't a nice experience. I mean; I just froze.... I was too scared. I was like, oh my God; I couldn't believe what was happening. The same thing happened with [this guy], you know. Like, he had me, like, he pushed me in the bedroom and pushed me down on the bed and he had my pants and underwear down before I could do anything. And then, I just freaked out, man. I pushed him against the bed and I slapped him and then I left. I left the apartment and I left him in there and I went and got [my boyfriend]. And then, his shift was over at four in the morning and we actually, [my boyfriend] told two of his buddies about this.... We walked home after four and went to Elgin Street Diner and went home to do this.... And this is at seven in the morning when we did this, you know.... And all four of us went down and we beat the crap out of this guy. Like, [my boyfriend] can't stand that; [my boyfriend] was ready to kill him, you know.... There was four of us there and one of the guys was really big, you know. And the guy was like, no, I'm not even gonna put up a fight for this.... And, this guy, we beat him up so bad, like, that he couldn't even, like, walk straight afterwards.... His jaw was dislocated. I know that for a fact because it was hanging. He had two black eyes. He had a gash on his cheek from someone's ring. I'm sure he had bruises everywhere else. He was burnt with a cigarette on his kneecap. He had been kicked several times in the stomach, internal bleeding maybe, I dunno, 'cause it was with steel toed boots. So, he definitely had some serious injuries.... He was beat up pretty bad. The one guy that was, like, beating him up with us, he wanted to kill him. He literally wanted to kill him.... And that freaked me out, man. I'm not, like, yeah, I may have violent tendencies but I would never, ever, ever think of killing a human being or an animal, for that matter, you know. Life is precious. So, that was pretty scary and I was like, "No, don't do that." (Gabrielle, personal communication, February 9, 2001)

Heln, too, discusses the careful, rational planning that went into an event where she sought vengeance.

I was at this, like, group. It was like a school, but it, there's a group home with it. But I wasn't in the group home. And there was this one girl that went there, well, went there with me. And we never really got along to well, I guess. But, and this one day, and I didn't

even know why, but she had. I was like; I was kinda high. And she, her and a couple of her friends, they like, they came and they like, they beat me up. And I didn't find out until after pretty much, she did it because she thought I slept with her boyfriend. And then I got really mad for a few reasons. I got mad because she couldn't deal with it herself. She had to bring friends with her. And then also 'cause, I was pregnant, and then ended up having a miscarriage because of the hoe. She hit everything, and me. So I kinda, I got really mad and I got a knife. And I brought it to school a couple of days later.... Yeah, she didn't have her friends around this time to protect her.... And I, like, I cut her up a bit, I guess. I didn't really stab her; I just, like, kinda slit her. I did it a few places. (Heln, personal communication, February 11, 2001)

Here's what Heln had to say when asked if there was any police involvement.

No, oh God, no. 'Cause, when you're, like, people in the street, whatever, people don't call the police for stuff like that. Not for anything, pretty much. Once you call the police and charge them, then you're labelled a cop caller. And that's what most people hate more than anybody down there, downtown and everything, is cop callers. People know once that person gets out of jail then they're gonna get it ten times worse. And even before that, the person's friends will kill you. Yeah, you just gotta kinda let things go. Or if you don't want to let things go, you have to retaliate. But pretty much for most people down there, calling the cops isn't an option. (Heln, personal communication, February 11, 2001)

Gabrielle and Heln's particularly aggressive actions were shaped by their surrounding environment and past experiences. According to Anderson (1994), their vengeful actions evolved from the street culture, which has a set of unspoken rules regulating the use of violence and a proper way to respond, if challenged. In the street culture, especially among young people, everyone knows that if the rules are violated, there are penalties of "payback."

It can be said that the women in the study adopted an informal attitude toward planning their violent interactions, with basically no element of

forethought. These findings contradict Artz's (1998) research on white working-class school girls who use violence. Her study revealed frequent experiences of orchestrating violence, where the young women formed groups and gathered audiences. As Artz stated, "[F]ights don't just happen; they are arranged" (p. 182).

"Fists and Feet Only"

In addition to choosing whether to use violence, the young women had to decide whether to use force or weapons or at least their threat. Usually, these types of decisions are a way to gain control over the victim and to define the situation. In the young women's situations, the need to use force was prevalent. In fact, 75 per cent of the assaults involved the use of fists or feet or both. Blunt instruments, such as a bat, crutch, or marble rock, were used in 12.5 per cent of assaults while knives were used in the remaining 12.5 per cent of attacks.

As Allison indicated, she preferred to use force to gain control in an uncertain situation. Here is what she had to say when asked if weapons were involved in any of the assaults:

Fight would be fistfight. I'd never use weapons, never.... No, fists – fists and feet only, and that's the way it was back then [five to seven years ago]. You don't use weapons.... Weapons, to me, means that you're not man enough to use your fists. (Allison, personal communication, January 20, 2001)

Allison's account raises the issue of gender and masculinity. Demonstration of toughness not only gains Allison recognition amongst her peers, but also proclaims her a "man" because she chose to use her fists and feet over weapons. Masculinity served to rank Allison in terms of her capacity to display physical force and power and, if she did not measure up, her peers would

ignore her. Indeed, Allison took pride in her fighting ability and her consequent acquired reputation and status.

Gabrielle's account was also typical of the young women I spoke with. She stated, "No, there was no weapons, just hands and feet" (Gabrielle, personal communication, February 9, 2001)

In other cases, however, weapons were used to overcome the victim's resistance, to threaten, or to injure a person. In the first instance, violence was used to gain the cooperation of the victim. Carol described her display of a knife as instigated by victim resistance, which occurred when the victim failed to pull the truck over to let the young woman and her friend out of the truck. As a follow-up to the incident that Carol described earlier, she states:

Like, you know, I put it right up to him on his neck, right there [pointing to the jugular vein].... But I was, okay, this is a situation where he's gotta stop the truck and, you know what I mean, like, and he never did stop it. So, we jumped.... I could've pulled it and shown it to him. But I grabbed his head and said, "You fucking stop the truck." I scared the fuck outta the guy. (Carol, personal communication, January 24, 2001)

In the second situation, the use of a weapon was a means to intimidate the victim. Again, Brenda provided this follow-up account:

The girl that I poured orange juice on ... the girl hit me and I hit her back. And then, the other fives girls started beating up on her and I just stood out of the way.... [I didn't have a weapon], not me. But the other girls had one. Yeah, they were just threatening with a knife. (Brenda, personal communication, January 24, 2001)

In the final incident, violent interactions were used to produce harm or injury to a person. Heln continues her description of the incident where she cut up a young woman:

I brought it [a knife] to school a couple of days later. And I, like, I cut her up a bit, I guess. I didn't really stab her; I just, like, kinda slit her. I did it a few places. I did it on her arms, mostly on her arms. I got her across the face once. It was, I was kinda, I dunno, I got her, mostly I wanted to get her in the stomach 'cause of the miscarriage and everything.... I was mad, I was really mad. I dunno, I wanted to kill her so badly. I just wanted; I wanted to make her hurt more than anything. I wanted to hurt her more than she ever hurt before, more than anybody hurt before. I dunno, I wanted people to see she wasn't so tough. And she wasn't, I dunno... I wanted to kill her really badly. But, I didn't though. (Heln, personal communication, February 11, 2001)

Generally, the young women's personal narratives are consistent with their commonly informal attitude toward planning in that they preferred to use fists and feet over weapons in violent situations.

Robbery, Drugs and Violence

According to Feeney (1986), robbery is typically classified as an instrumental crime while assault is viewed as an expressive offense. Moreover, it has been compared to other property crime offenses with respect to its primary motive, that is, to obtain money or some other desired valuables (Cook, 1990, p. 93). This was certainly the case for two of the young women, who stated that they were motivated by the need for money. Carol provides us with this account:

I was living at the Y.... These kids came to the YMCA and they wanted [to buy drugs from] me, like, they had, like, 200 dollars in their wallet 'cause they opened the wallet in front of me. I said, "Sure, I'll be back." And I ran upstairs and I told these two guys that there's someone we can jack downstairs, that they got money. I said, "They've got money, if you wanna take it, give me your cut." They were like, "Come down with us." So they came down and they had like knives in their pocket and shit. I didn't think, I thought it would be so easy to just grab the money. But the kid knew and he hid the wallet.... As soon as they saw us coming out, the kid who was on the bike chucked the wallet in the bushes 'cause he knew he was gonna get jacked 'cause there were these two guys coming out [with me]. They were tough, so they knew, you know. So they threw it.... He hid it in a bush across the street from the

museum and my two guy friends were just like. One guy pissed his pants, that's how scared he was 'cause they had knives to them.... It was in the middle of the night and we didn't know where it was.... We made the kids go on the ground and look for it.... Before, I was nice to the kids and that. I was like, "Okay, just look for the wallet and nothing will happen." There was one kid and he was crying and I was, "Don't show them that you're afraid. Just find the wallet." I was trying to be so nice and understanding.... And, it was on the ground and, like; I said to the kids, "All you have to do is look for the fucking wallet...." We were out there for an hour looking for that wallet. We were there for a long frigging time, in the bush.... After, I was standing right behind them and they didn't see me and they were talking and I blew them, like, so hard. I kicked them, I kicked them both, and I kicked them around a circle, a whole circle. I kicked them around the whole thing. And we had to wait to sun up to find the wallet and we finally found it. It took long enough. (Carol, personal communication, January 24, 2001)

Carol describes her emotional response to the event:

I was thinking I wanted the money. That's what I was thinking. Fuck that, I needed the money. And then, I dunno, the money, that's all I was thinking about was finding that fucking wallet. (Carol, personal communication, January 24, 2001)

While Carol preferred to use force to gain the cooperation of the victims, her accomplices decided to use weapons. She explains:

The guys did, they used knives. They didn't like use it, but they used the other end of it. They hit them over the head with, like, the handle. And he had it up to his throat. But they were going crazy. And I told them, I was like, "Guys, these guys are like little kids. Like, you don't need to use knives with little kids. You know, you grab them and say give me your shit...." I thought about how they had the knife up to the kid and stuff like that. The kids were scared. Like, I was like shitting, I was like nervous. I knew it was wrong. I was thinking you don't need a knife. People think they need knives for everything. No, no, no, like, your feet work better than your knives. (Carol, personal communication, January 24, 2001)

And what did Carol and her friends do with the money?

We split it. We only, like, got fifty bucks each. There was only \$150 in the wallet, anyway, that we found. We thought there was

more, but I guess there wasn't. So we each got fifty bucks. (Carol, personal communication, January 24, 2001)

Hein, too, became involved in robberies for an instrumental reason. However, Hein's involvement in robbery was also driven by a need to support her drug habit. According to Goldstein (1985), there are several ways that drugs and the routine use of violence are related to each other. First, the tendency to use violence is caused by the pharmacological effect of the drug on the user. Second, the exorbitant price of drugs forces users to resort to calculated violent crime in order to support their continued drug use. Finally, systemic violence is commonplace in the drug distribution system in order to protect the market share of business or to enforce rules and boundaries for buyers and dealers. Here, Hein describes the necessity for violence:

I guess, one time I was doing drugs and everything. And I dunno, I hadn't been on it for a while and really wanted to and everything. I was out with a couple of friends of mine and we all wanted to get high. And I dunno, it was like we just kinda saw somebody walking around the street and just like we could stop that guy and fucking take all his money. We took all his money and beat the shit out of him. And I was with one girlfriend of mine and a couple of guys and so, I dunno, we just kinda, it was like nighttime. And so we just kinda went up to him and started just kinda talking to him and everything. He was around our age. I kinda think he knew what we were gonna do. So we just kinda; I didn't have a knife or anything on me, one of my friends did. And we pulled a knife on him and told him to give us his money. And he gave us his money and then my friend cut him anyways, then stabbed him. And so then, we were all beating him and kicking him. I dunno, we were only doing it for a couple of minutes, I guess. Then we just kinda ran away. (Hein, personal communication, February 11, 2001)

When asked if there was any police involvement, Hein replied:

I dunno, we were already gone away. I dunno, the guy didn't know us and didn't know our names. He didn't know where we hung out. 'Cause lots of times when my friends go and rob people they go

further away. They will just drive down somewhere, maybe a hundred kilometers away from where we hang out or whatever. And just spend the whole night robbing a whole bunch of people. And then come back 'cause nobody knows you out there. And the police will be looking for you around that area and nobody can find you. (Heln, personal communication, February 11, 2001)

In describing her emotional responses to her violent behaviour, Heln talked about the "highs" and adrenaline rushes. She also displayed feelings of guilt and remorse following her violent interactions. Heln summarizes her feelings:

I dunno, it was kinda like getting a rush. Even after it, you kinda feel like you're high. You're all bouncing off the walls and kinda feeling like you want to go and do it again. And I dunno, I was glad to do it, 'cause it was fun.... I wanted to do it all the time but I was kinda scared to. Right before it happened I would say, I want to do this. I want to do this. And then, I'd get scared and just do it because you were out with people to do it. You start doing it and getting more into it.... And it lets some of your anger out and everything. And yes, you, you got some money. You got some money in your pocket.... I haven't like, wanted to but I don't have any money. I feel kinda different about everything. I kinda feel bad about it. (Heln, personal communication, February 11, 2001)

When asked how much money she got and what she did with it, Heln simply stated:

I didn't get much 'cause there was the four of us, you know. He didn't even have that much money. We thought he would have more money than he did. We took his cell phone and he didn't even have not even a hundred bucks on him. We got some junk [drugs] with that. (Heln, personal communication, February 11, 2001)

Heln described other robbery events where economic motivation also dominated the circumstances:

A girl friend and I would pretend to be prostitutes then we would have a couple of guy friends would beat him up and take his money. And we would all split the money. Or we would pretend to

sell a person weed and take them into an alleyway and then beat them up. (Heln, personal communication, February 11, 2001)

Apparently, Heln's serious involvement in robbery was driven by her need for money and her addiction to drugs. The role that substance abuse played in changing her life cannot be underestimated. While it is important to view Heln as an active participant in this process and capable of making choices and decisions about her violent crimes, she does not make crime her livelihood. We need to pay close attention to the fact that Heln's perpetration of robbery occurred during the course of and following her involvement in other offenses, which included heavy drug use and drug dealing. What this suggests is that Heln's actions, behaviours, and decisions are very much a result of her own history and of young women's social positioning within society, in general.

Having said this, however, we are still left with the question of how the young women's use of violence has impacted on them. We turn first to the young women's perceptions of being identified (by themselves or others) as violent and the effect that their violent behaviour has had on them. Then we will attempt to question the moral judgments of the young women who are at the centre of this study.

"Being Called Violent ... It Makes Me Kinda Feel Bad"

The young women in the study are, in many ways, no different from other young women in our society. They share many experiences and have similar dreams, goals, and aspirations for their futures as their contemporaries. However, one feature that does make their lives different from young women

collectively is that these young women have been identified (by themselves or others) as violent and their actions and behaviours have been judged by society.

The young women have given thought to being labelled as violent and the effects that such a stigma has had on their lives and on their conception of self.

Gabrielle provided me with the following description:

I don't like being called violent. I'm not proud of that fact. I'm actually quite ashamed that people think I'm violent. You know, I can see where they're coming from because I do have this side of me that just flashes in and out and it causes me to just lose control of myself and lash out. And it's not; it's not a good feeling when it happens. (Gabrielle, personal communication, February 9, 2001)

When asked how this affects her, Gabrielle replied:

It humbles me, it really does. I mean; being violent makes me realize that no one is perfect; you know what I mean. Like everybody has a drawback and that's just one of mine and you have to learn to live with it and you have to learn to control it because you can't go through life just exhibiting this behaviour, you know. And that's something I've learned through a lot of mistakes.... It's just something that you have to say, look, you know, it's not a big deal. I'm not always like this. This just happens once in a while. (Gabrielle, personal communication, February 9, 2001)

Elizabeth, too, was identified as violent. Here is what she had to say about how it impacts on her:

Being called violent [is] someone who fights a lot.... How does this affect me, it makes me kinda feel bad because, you know, I don't like to be called violent. I don't wanna hit people. Like, right now, I'm not gonna hit anyone. I want to, but I'm not going to you know. I got out of that stuff, like; I got my temper down. I was going to anger management when I was in school, so that kinda calmed me down a bit. But it's affecting me a lot, like, you know, being called violent. It made me think how many times I lost because of it, how many people, like, don't like me because of it. (Elizabeth, personal communication, January 26, 2001)

Here is Frances' account of what it is like to be called violent:

I don't like to be called violent 'cause I'm not violent. Like I said, I don't like to fight at all. It's not a good thing, you know. And if somebody was to call me violent, like, they can think what they want.... But if people, like, if people want to call me violent, they can go ahead, you know. I don't like it, but if that's what they want to think, then I can't change their thinking. Everybody has a right to their own opinion.... Maybe that will stop them from trying to be violent with me or whatever they think. But I don't think anybody should be called violent unless there's like a really good reason for it.... I used to, it would've upset me a couple of years ago. It would've really upset me, but not anymore.... It doesn't upset me 'cause I don't really pay attention to what other people think of me usually.... I just don't care. (Frances, personal communication, February 4, 2001)

Here, Allison and Heln offer somewhat different perspectives of what it is like to be called violent: First, we hear from Allison:

Being called violent, I've had people tell me I'm violent. To me, it means people are afraid of me and they're scared and they won't step up to me because of that fact.... At first, I felt bad because I didn't want people to be afraid of me and I didn't want them to run from me or anything. But then after awhile, it gave me an advantage to where I could get what I want and I could do what I want and nobody is gonna step in my way because of that fact. So I started to enjoy it and it became a power to me.... Yeah, it's not the best solution, like; I've learned that in the past couple of months. I have an anger management problem so I've been working on that. For me, violence used to be the number one solution. (Allison, personal communication, January 20, 2001)

Next, Heln explains her viewpoint:

...[S]ome people are different. It's kinda like when somebody calls me violent it's almost like, I dunno, you get this proud feeling. You feel like people respect you, more than if you just let people push you around.... [Y]ou like feel good about yourself, kinda.... [A]fter that, it was kinda like, you kinda get like you want to be more violent after that. People call you violent and you're hanging around with your friends and they are all laughing about it, sorta.... Like I would go over to my friends and we would be all talking about it and we are all getting hepped up. It gets you into kinda being kinda cool.... [E]veryone seems so happy with you. They all think you did such a good thing. You want to do it again. Like a real mask, everyone thinks you're cool.... [After] I just feel kinda

spooky. I feel bad. I really find I don't feel as good about myself as I do right after it happens. Talking with your friends, it seems as if you are in control and you feel cool, feel okay. After when you think about it, you feel like a bad person. (Hein, personal communication, February 11, 2001)

For the women with whom I spoke, it is evident that they are all survivors of violence. Their stories reveal how interconnected being identified as violent and their conception of self has been in their ongoing struggles to survive such a stigma. Surviving suggests that violence is a prevalent feature in the young women's lives. Given these circumstances, trying to understand their lives, then, involves attempting to understand the conditions under which they condone the use of violence, which we turn to next.

Moral Judgments and Violence

Few of the young women approve of violence; however, many of them accept the use of violent behaviour in specific situations. Agnew (1994) suggests that young people use techniques of neutralization to justify their violent behaviour. Before we consider the young women's moral judgments with regard to aggressive and violent behaviours, we must look at why they chose to use violence in the first place. Reasons, such as "it was the easier way out" or "I chose it to protect myself," dominated the young women's interviews. Other times, their histories of abuse were cited as the cause of their personal problems and violent behaviour. The easy way out was the case for Gabrielle. She comments:

[I]t was the easiest way out. I was very chubby when I was smaller and I got picked on.... They'd call me names. They'd make fun of my weight. They'd alienate me from everybody else, you know. ...I found that if I used violence then, if I acted tough and became tomboy, they respected me and they'd leave me alone, you know.

So that was how I dealt with it. I didn't know any other way of doing it. And it just kind of stuck with me now. (Gabrielle, personal communication, February 9, 2001)

For Allison, the pathway was quite similar:

It was the easier way out 'cause people were afraid of violence. A lot of people didn't know how to fight. It was also a power trip for me. (Allison, personal communication, January 20, 2001)

Janice, too, saw violence as a simple solution. She explains:

[I]t was the first thing that came to my mind and the easiest to execute. You know, like, if I didn't choose violence myself and if I called someone else to be violent, then I wouldn't have had to be violent. It was the first thing that came to my mind and the easiest way to get my frustrations out. I didn't really think much beyond.... And it seem justified to me 'cause I was aggravated. So I did it. (Janice, personal communication, March 11, 2001)

Carol, on the other hand, offers a different, but interesting perspective about her decision to use violence. She recounts the importance of being able to protect herself while living on the streets:

...[I] lived on the streets. If I never lived on the streets, I wouldn't even think about it. Because when we were on the streets, if you're not gonna fight, you're gonna die.... 'Cause when you're on the street, everything is to the extreme. When you do everything, you do it to the extreme. You beg to the extreme. You eat to the extreme 'cause you don't know when you're gonna eat again. You need to, like, be really, like, tough, tough. People taught me to be tough and don't let people push you around. When you go downtown for the first time, they all wonder about you. They wanna know if you can fight. You have to tell them straight out, "Fuck you." Then they know that this girl, you know, she's not fooling around. So you gotta prove yourself. And that's the only way to do it is to act really hard. But you're not, but you have to act that way.... And that's just the way it is.... You just can't let anybody come up to you and punch away or you will end up dead, or beaten up, or something. So you gotta be, like, you gotta learn how to fight. (Carol, personal communication, January 24, 2001)

For other young women in the study, such as Brenda and Hein, their use of violence was intricately tied up with their abuse histories. Brenda recounts why she chose violence:

To try and get out my anger from being abused as a child ... I would use anger and violence instead; [t]o take it out on somebody else instead of talking about it. (Brenda, personal communication, January 24, 2001)

Hein, too, had a rich history of physical and sexual abuse. She recalls what led her to choose violence:

I got hit sometimes when I was younger. I just, it always made me feel better to hurt somebody; it made me feel powerful. (Hein, personal communication, February 11, 2001)

In reflecting on their violence, the young women were asked if there were situations where they thought it was okay to use violence. Although the young women may feel somewhat guilty about their violent behaviour, they felt it was okay to use violence if they were hit first, it was necessary to defend oneself, or if there is a threat to family or close friends. The following accounts illustrate the young women's moral judgments. First, Janice provided me with this argument:

...[I]f somebody is using it on you then you have all the right to do it back. You don't have to take anything from anybody; you know what I mean. If somebody is harassing you and pushing you around and doing whatever, you have all the right to do whatever you wanna do back to defend yourself. That's pretty much the only time that I can actually justify violence is when it's done to you first and you're standing up or defending yourself. That's when it seems right, but aside from that, not really. (Janice, personal communication, March 11, 2001)

Here is Allison's line of reasoning:

I think if your life is in danger and that's the only way you can turn, then fine.... [I]f you should be walking home and people came and attacked you, that would be automatic, "Okay, fight for your life."

Like if you can't walk away from it, to me that would be okay to fight.... But if I can, I'll try everything in my power to and if it still doesn't work, then I'll fight.... If you can walk away from a fight, then walk away from it. To me, now, that's the best think you can do is walk away from a fight, if you can. If not, then do what you have to do, but try as hard as you can to walk away. That's what I say; that's my motto. (Allison, personal communication, January 20, 2001)

Carol states her case:

I think for anybody who defends themselves if they're getting their ass kicked, ... for sure, 100 per cent. If someone's gonna kill you, you don't let it happen.... [If someone provokes you], I don't even think it's right. You could easily be like, "Fuck you" and walk away or something like that. But if the person hits you, then it's a different story. (Carol, personal communication, January 24, 2001)

Heln insists it is okay to use violence in the following situations:

I think it's okay if someone else is hurting you, like to hurt them back. Or if somebody is hurting someone else, you can defend that person. Other than that I don't think it's really okay to use violence. (Heln, personal communication, February 11, 2001)

As we can see from the young women's personal accounts, there exists a change in their attitudes with regards to aggressive and violent behaviour. Perhaps even more important, the young women were slowly recognizing that using violence was not a viable solution and, I might add, it did not solve anything. As Brenda stated, "Fighting is the worst of anything, it doesn't solve anything, just enemies. It just gives you more enemies" (Brenda, personal communication, January 24, 2001).

The young women also acknowledged that there are always other options available for them to take, such as ignoring it, talking it out, or walking away. Gabrielle simply stated, "I know there's other options. When you're angry, you don't have to lash out. You don't have to use violence. You can use words and

they're as potent as violence is. You know, you can work through it" (Gabrielle, personal communication, February 9, 2001). The young women had arrived at a point in their lives in which their violent behaviour seemed senseless. Implicit in their assessment was a commitment to stop using violence, which is the first step in changing.

In conclusion, the personal narratives provided by the young women indicate that there are obvious differences underlying their motivations to use violence. The young women provided various reasons for their violent behaviour, such as to have fun, command respect, solve disputes, and seek revenge, or as a way of self-defense or social control. For the most part, the young women described their violent actions as frequently unplanned and more informal in nature. Consistent with their generally casual attitude toward planning was their choice of fists and feet over weapons in violent situations. What is more, the young women were not strolling the streets looking to engage in "unprovoked" violence. Nevertheless, their choice to use violence was not without reason. The young women alluded that their use of violence was often in response to the victims' behaviour and the demand to protect themselves and their public self-image. Given these reasons, if we are to consider other aspects of violence, such as retaliation, it appears that the young women's use of violence may have played a more meaningful role in their lives than might have been anticipated.

In addition to differences in the young women's underlying motivations to use violence, there appears to be different emotional responses within the group

of women. In explaining their use of violence, the young women identified feeling frustrated, humiliated, shamed, hurt, and angry. They also displayed feelings of guilt, remorse, and shock following their violent interactions. The young women's narratives reveal as well how their actions and behaviours have been judged by society and how interconnected the label "violent" and their conception of self has impacted on their efforts to survive. Besides, few of the young women approve of using violence except in situations where they are hit first, self-defense, or to defend a family member or friend. Finally, as the circumstances of the young women's lives and routine activities changed, it became clear that some of the young women were actively considering alternatives to using violence. In the next chapter, I discuss turning points that prompted the young women to think about leaving the social world of violence behind them.

CHAPTER 7

Escaping the Maelstrom of Violent Behaviour

As the previous two chapters revealed, for many of the young women marginalization of their lives placed them in a street culture where their social interactions were increasingly limited to people involved in these economic and social behaviours. More and more, their individual identities and social relations were defined within the street culture, further enmeshing them in a world of violence. Over time, the young women were involved in a social world that offered them little in the way of an alternative identity or life.

Although their lives were filled with chaos and violence, nine of the young women recently made a commitment to stop using violence. Ultimately, as the young women themselves acknowledged, they must accept responsibility for their violent actions and behaviours. As Dorothy simply stated, "There may be some occasions where you may blow up and some consequences get served, but that's taking responsibility for your actions" (Dorothy, personal communication, January 24, 2001)

In this chapter, I turn once again to the personal accounts of the young women who are trying to escape the vortex of violent behaviour. I explore several factors that influenced the young women's decisions to move away from violence.

Making the Decision to Stop

For the young women, the decision to resolve their violent behaviour was precipitated by a number of aspects. For the most part, these influences revolved around social reactions to their violent actions and behaviours.

Particularly, some young women mentioned the threat of being arrested or detained in custody while others reported being ostracized or alienated by their families and friends. Still, for other young women, the possibility of being shot or murdered affected their decisions to stop using violence.

For Brenda, the threat of being incarcerated yet another time took precedence over her continued participation in violence:

I don't find myself violent anymore because ... I was in Innes [Young Offender Centre] twice and I haven't been back for a while.... The girl that I poured orange juice on, she had her three friends [beat me up] because I started the fight.... And I ended up going to jail the next day for breaching a probation.... It just hit me and I was like, "Oh wow, like, I can't be doing this anymore, it's not a good thing." (Brenda, personal communication, January 24, 2001)

While Frances has never been arrested for assault, the prospect of it frightens her. She explains:

I'm not proud of [my use of violence] at all. I feel bad about any time I've ever been violent, like, with anybody. I don't like violence at all. Like actually getting into fights, no, it's not even worth it, like, with the pain and the struggles of, like, getting arrested, it being a possibility, you know. It's not even worth it at all. (Frances, personal communication, February 4, 2001)

Other young women commented on how personally isolated they felt from family members because of their involvement in violence. Allison explains:

I have no contact with [my brother] whatsoever. We stopped talking about a year and a half ago.... My sisters, well, my sister in Hamilton, we don't talk either. We just talked, for the first time in over a year, a week ago.... My other sister I met for the first time in April last year. I met her for the first time in nine years. We talk every now and then. She's not proud of me or anything. She doesn't approve of what I do with street youth and stuff. (Allison, personal communication, January 20, 2001)

Isabelle provides us with a similar account:

Like I haven't seen much of my twin brother. I've talked to him on the phone, but I've never seen him [in] twelve years.... He doesn't wanna see me though. He'll talk to me, but he won't see me because of the stuff that I did to him. But he doesn't understand all the stuff that he's done to me through the years, you know. Like, I don't find it's fair at all. (Isabelle, personal communication, February 26, 2001)

Still, for other young women, the vulnerability and the fear of dying on the streets helped them to ease out of the violent life. Once again we hear from Allison as she provides an illustration of her participation in a wide range of street crimes, including intimidation, assault, and drug debt collecting. Here, she recalls a time when a gun was pulled on her:

[When I was fourteen], I ended up becoming a debt collector doing that stuff. I remember there was one time when I went to collect money from these guys. It was a bad mistake because I got a gun pulled out on me.... I was just like, "Oh my God, what am I gonna do?" But the guy just gave me a warning and he let me go. Since that day, I've never went after anyone again for somebody else, I was just like, "Do it yourself, never again...." And I think that's what changed it all for me. That's when I said, "I've had enough" having a gun put to your head and you're thinking that this is gonna be the last couple of minutes of your life. It was quite scary for me actually. So that changed a lot of my violent life right there. I know that if somebody wants to start beef with me, then I know I have the power to fight and I know I can fight, it's just that I'm not gonna take advantage of those powers anymore. (Allison, personal communication, January 20, 2001)

At the same time, the fact that several of the young women decided to stop using violence does not mean that all who reach that point will never use violence again. Despite their efforts, there is always the chance that there will be episodic accounts of violence, such as self-defense. As Allison recounts, "The only time I fight now is if someone else initiates it" (Allison, personal communication, January 20, 2001). As a case in point, the issue of resolving to

stop their violent behaviour does not arise. Nevertheless, examining the social context in which the young women's violent actions and behaviours occur does make them more understandable.

In conclusion, the prospect of being arrested or spending time in custody, being personally isolated from their families, or the fear of dying on the streets may have possibly motivated the young women's decisions to stop using violence. Further, the young women may have arrived at a turning point in their lives at which they grew tired of the harsh street conditions and the problems and consequences of their violent behaviours. Given these insights, a change in the young women's attitudes may have eventually led them to question and to reevaluate their participation in violence.

Embarking on a New Life

For the young women, making a commitment to change their violent behaviours was just the first step to ending their involvement in violence. To be successful at their endeavours, the next stage required that they leave their situations and redefine their individual identities and social relationships, which had been rooted in the street culture. At this stage of the transition, the young women had to decide what to do with themselves and their lives and, more importantly, to establish and maintain relationships with new friends, who accept and support their alternative identity. Few of the young women had maintained their relationships with people not involved in violence. Given their families' histories, the young women had to work hard to construct alternative identities.

Some of the young women stated that they were helped in their pathway to change by the availability of programs and services that were outside of their

social worlds. The young women understood clearly the need to remove themselves from their circumstances, so they sought formal treatment as a way to attain their goal. Typically, the young women entered residential drug treatment programs for support, as was the case with Allison and Carol.

We revisit Allison's earlier life-threatening account, which triggered her decision to abandon the violent lifestyle. Given her situation, Allison perceived clearly the need to relocate to another city and to seek formal treatment as a way of removing herself from the social world of violence. Consequently, she entered a residential drug treatment program outside of Ottawa, Ontario, which provided her with structure, social support, and alternatives to changing her behaviour. Here, Allison explains the importance of her physical relocation.

I moved here last April [2000].... And I came here and ended up going to rehab.... And it was the best experience of my life. I got to learn a lot about myself.... [S]ince I've been out of rehab and in Ottawa, I've just gotten into one fight. I've been doing really good here. I'm trying to keep it at that – one fight only. It's hard, but people can do it if they put their mind to it. I've changed a lot since I've been in Ottawa. And I think Ottawa has brought out the best in me. (Allison, personal communication, January 20, 2001)

Carol was also aided in her reintegration by attending a drug rehabilitation program for ten months:

Like before, it was awful, man, 'cause I didn't want to see my parents. I didn't even wanna talk 'cause I used to do drugs all the time.... But now, it's been good since I got back from Vancouver. 'Cause when I got back from Vancouver, my mom saw me and she knew that I was fucked up. She detoxed me herself. That was about two years ago. And then, I went to rehab and stuff.... I don't wanna do what I was doing before. And I haven't yet. I don't know how I'm doing it, but I'm doing it. (Carol, personal communication, January 24, 2001)

Yet, for other young women who decided to move away from violence, there were different courses of action that reinforced their changed behaviours. For some, changes to their circle of peers enabled them to stop using violence. For other young women, the replacement of old behaviour with alternative behaviours helped to transform their individual identities and lives.

Again, we hear from Allison as she discusses the importance of removing herself from the street life and meeting new friends to begin her quest for an identity that validated her new sense of self. Here, Allison describes her network of friends:

My friends are really cool people. I had two crowds of friends. The first crowd, when I first came here, they were a good crowd, but they liked to fight a lot. Fighting was their best friend. And I think I grew out of fighting; I had my scare and that was good enough for me. So my crowd of friends changed. Now, I hang around a really positive group. (Allison, personal communication, January 20, 2001)

Dorothy, too, acknowledges the importance of maintaining distance from her old friends. She explains:

My friends are all different.... Like some of them are, like, heavily into crack and some are into weed. I try not to get involved in that any more. (Dorothy, personal communication, January 24, 2001)

Gabrielle's account also reflects this same motivation:

And, as for friends wise, I don't have a lot of people I hang out with because I found a lot of people are into drugs down here and I'm really against drugs. And I don't wanna be around any of that shit. (Gabrielle, personal communication, February 9, 2001)

For other young women, however, they stress the significance of rekindling family ties. Allison describes her situation:

[My mom and I], we didn't get along that good. Me and her always fought. It was pretty much me and myself only. So I didn't have pretty much anyone around me to help me out.... I just started talking to my parents again, for the first time in a couple of years. And things are going good now. So, we get along really good. (Allison, personal communication, January 20, 2001)

Yet, other young women grew tired of using violence and sought out positive ways to replace their old behaviours. Gabrielle explains how she found alternative responses to using violence:

I know there's other options. Well, when you're angry, you don't have to lash out. You don't have to use violence. ...[My violence] used to be a lot more severe when I was younger. And as I matured, I found other ways of dealing with it.... But lately, I won't, people don't make me want to be violent anymore. You know, I get frustrated with them and I've learned just to walk away, you know. Like I'll go deal with it. I'll write something down about it, you know. I'll find some outlet for it, but I won't, I don't like to use violence. (Gabrielle, personal communication, February 9, 2001)

In Isabelle's situation, her commitment to stop using violence was facilitated by her participation in a crime prevention program. At the same time, it validated her new sense of self. Isabelle provides this account:

I don't wanna use violence anymore. That's why I did get all the help that I could, you know, so that I could stop all the violence and my anger, you know. I'll do my best, you know, to help other people and myself.... The Pinecrest Queensway Health Community Centre, you know, like the West Side Youth Against Crime [program], it helps people out. I've been with them for about six years now. It helps people with their confidence and stuff, you know. If you need anybody to talk to, they're there. It's good to talk to somebody about your violence that you have. (Isabelle, personal communication, February 26, 2001)

Similar to Isabelle, the pride of maintaining one's sense of self was also an important motivation for other young women. Elizabeth describes her incentive to stop using violence, "I'm a good person. I feel good about myself

right now and I'm not, like, being violent" (Elizabeth, personal communication, January 26, 2001).

In conclusion, strategies to stop using violence and to develop positive support networks that accept and support their alternative identities were common themes in the young women's representation of their attempts to move away from violence. Other themes included the availability of programs and services that helped to influence the young women's decisions to leave the street life and to reaffirm their new identities. While this has not been an easy task, the young women recognize that their continued involvement in violence would be made more difficult if they did not take action to remove themselves from the old patterns of their lives. In the course of adopting an alternative identity, establishing relationships with positive peers, renewing affiliations with their families, and changing their daily routines, the young women developed a strong commitment not to return to violence and the street culture. As the young women found the strength, support, and resources to change their lives, they began to establish and maintain commitments and involvements in other aspects of life. In this way, the young women began to receive social gratification and their new identities began to gradually emerge.

As we shall see in the next chapter, perhaps most important to the young women taking up new social identities and lives are the recommendations of support and services they suggest for other young women in similar circumstances, which involves an alternative lifestyle devoid of violence, crime, and drugs.

Before that, however, we will attempt to understand how living in poverty and the erosion of the social welfare state may influence young women's decisions to engage in violence. Such an understanding requires an exploration of the economic and structural circumstances that contour and condition the everyday lives of these young women and their families. Most importantly though, we must ask ourselves, why have we seen a reported increase in female violence during the past decade?

Making Sense of Young Women's Participation in Violence

The decisions these young women made about their lives and their participation in violence did not develop in a vacuum. Indeed, many of their choices were made while they were growing up. Moreover, the circumstances of lives and the resources of their families and neighbourhoods defined their decisions, in many ways. Most of the young women came from extremely troubled and disrupted home environments. Furthermore, living in a society marked by a lack of jobs that barely pay a decent living wage, the fallout from childhood victimization, the stigma of being identified as "violent," and the resulting alienation and lack of hope for the future placed many of the young women at special risk of falling victim to aggressive behaviour. Thus, we are drawn to the question of the social placement of the young women who are at the centre of this research.

The young women comprised an extremely marginalized faction. In class terms, all of the young women, except for one, were undereducated and unemployed. Nine of the young women I interviewed had grade ten or less education. Most of the young women had never worked for any length of time

for a decent living wage. Of the one who had, her job could be classified as low skilled and low paid (i.e. janitor). Consequently, many of the young women had to rely on social assistance benefits. The class positioning of the young women would obviously have an impact on their ability to access economic and social resources to survive difficulties and, in particular, to survive their participation in violence. As follows, I maintain that economic and social marginalization created particular problems and limited the choices or options available to the young women to manage them.

The structural circumstances of women in general in our society also figures into the equation as well. Marriage rates, employment rates of single-parent mothers, and the real value of social assistance benefits have declined simultaneously throughout the last decade (National Council of Welfare, 1998a). According to the National Council of Welfare (1998a), marriage rates declined and, in turn, the percentage of female-headed households (both with and without children) increased from 1980 to 1996. Furthermore, most of these households had incomes below the poverty line. As a result, the population composition changes led to a growing trend in working-poor neighbourhoods in which children and youth growing up were likely to be raised by a poor mother.

In addition, there was increased poverty among female-headed households as employment and wages declined sharply for working women with low educational achievement. Since job skills became an important indicator of employment success, many places of employment excluded women from the

workforce. The poverty rate for families led by single-parent mothers with less than a high school education was 87.2 per cent whereas single-parent mothers who graduated from high school had a poverty rate of 51.8 per cent (National Council of Welfare, 1998a). Thus, these figures show us that family type and level of education both influence a person's risk of poverty.

As a result of unemployment, many women are forced onto welfare to survive. Not surprisingly, 48 per cent of all welfare recipients in Canada are single-parent mothers and their children as well as unattached women. Single-parent mothers and their children accounted for 388,426 of welfare cases while cases for unattached women were estimated at 306,695 (National Council of Welfare, 1998b). Yet, "the real value" of social assistance benefits, taking inflation into account, has declined significantly between 1986 and 1996 because provinces have imposed freezes and cuts to welfare rates and programs (National Council of Welfare, 1997b). Similar to many women and children in our society, the young women in this study were living in poverty.

Because women are subject to the marginalization process inherent in a capitalist society, many experience high unemployment rates and impoverished conditions. We know from a socialist feminist theory that the capitalist class owns and controls the means of production and employs labour to pursue profit making and accumulate wealth. Profits result because the capitalist class can exploit the labour power of the working class. And in order for the capitalist class to function, they require an abundant supply of labour in the market, such as women, who provide work at low wages. Working outside the home, women

have been segregated into "feminine" occupations, such as clerical, service, nursing, school teaching, and cleaning, where working conditions are poor, job security is minimal, and wages are abysmally low. Thus, the sexual division of labour reappears in the workforce, where women generally do the same type of labour they do in the home. As follows, women have been drawn, as a reserve army of labour, to fill the needs of patriarchy under capitalism, since it preserves a lower status for women and channels them generally into low-wage positions (Carniol, 2000; Messerschmidt, 1986). As a result, many women, particularly minority women, experience severe economic problems.

Considering these economic realities, it should not be hard to see why more women are becoming involved in crime and delinquency, particularly property-related offences, such as shoplifting and fraud, which becomes an accommodation to their subordinate and powerless position in the gender and class hierarchy (Messerschmidt, 1986). According to Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics (1998), cases involving property crimes accounted for the largest proportion of the court caseload, where female youth were charged most often with theft under \$5,000.

As I stated earlier, the young women in this study were mostly involved in administrative non-compliance and property-related crimes. At the same time, this group of young women was also facing an extremely high unemployment rate -- nine of the ten participants were unemployed and receiving some form of social assistance. When viewed in this light, the young women's increasing involvement in property-related offences could be seen as a consequence of the

role played by poverty brought on by the rise in single-family households headed by females.

The leads me to ask, what about crimes of violence? While mainstream media leads us to believe that official arrest statistics reflect dramatic increases in female crime, especially in violent offences, I tend to dispute this analysis. Other scholars, such as Carrington (1999) and Chesney-Lind and Shelden (1998) also call into question this assessment. They argue that female crimes of violence against the person (murder, aggravated assault, and robbery) have increased absolutely but not relative to the rate for males. The authors state that these supposed increases were based on very small absolute numbers, where even a small change in number could create a large change in percentage. Rather, they assert that this absolute increase can be explained in the changed attitudes of those who label young women as criminals – the public, police, and courts. I also alluded to this fact in Chapter 2, where I pointed out that the public is now more willing to report female young offenders, the police more likely to arrest, and the courts more prepared to convict. Therefore, what this evidence indicates to us is that while female violent crime has changed very little, the response of the public, police, and courts may well have been affected.

For many women, the effects of economic marginalization are also compounded by anxieties concerning their ability to adequately fulfill the social role of mother. Though they may love their children, many women are unable to cope with the economic, physical, and emotional demands of parenthood, making it difficult to reconcile their needs with those of their children. Their

worries have heightened during the past decade, in part because of declining access to adequate financial assistance and the failure of social assistance benefits to be indexed to inflation (National Council of Welfare, 1998a).

In fact, for an overwhelming majority of the young women in the study and their families, financial resources were very limited. What is more, separation, divorce, and disorganization often marked the lives of many of these families. Having a limited comprehension of priorities and consequences, I can understand how frustrations could mount over their ability to pay bills and make ends meet financially. In addition, the seeming intractability of their situations, caused in large part by the lack of well-paying jobs and the erosion of the social welfare state, could also engender bitterness and anger in many of the families. The need to exercise some degree of control and to strike out at somebody was often reflected in the parents' relationships with the young women. At the very least, the frustrations of unrelenting poverty shorten the fuse in such people, therefore contributing to a lack of patience with anyone, including their partners or children, who irritate them.

Home life was often fraught with anger, verbal disputes, family violence, as well as physical and sexual abuse. The young women observed these anti-social behaviours. In many circumstances, the parents were quite aggressive with the young women, often yelling at and physically hitting them for little or no reason. Seldom did any significant explanations follow the verbal and physical abuse, which was often portrayed under the guise of punishment. Consequently, I believe that many of the young women learned to fight at an

early age, oftentimes using their ill-tempered parents or adults around them as their role models. In effect, they learned that to solve any kind of interpersonal problem, one must quickly resort to aggressive and violent behaviour to put their point across. Thus, for the young women to survive and protect themselves, they had to amass inner resources and be ready to deal with their troubles in a commanding way.

According to a recent report released by Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics (2001) that examined child abuse, children at risk, spousal violence, and homicides, children and youth who are exposed to adults physically fighting in the home are more likely to exhibit physical aggression. In addition, these children and youth are also more likely to display emotional disorders and hyperactivity and to commit delinquent acts against property.

As poverty becomes more persistent in lives of these families and as positive role models disappear, it is no surprise that young women looking for direction to adopt an alternative life have little direct personal support. I sense that the informal social controls of families and neighbourhoods that help to determine young women's engagement in violence, particularly the traditional patterns of gender role socialization of monitoring their activities more carefully than males, have been impaired.

In addition, the effects of structural changes have brought increasing inequality into the lives of these families and young women who live in distressed neighbourhoods. When we consider the interrelated processes of living in poverty and being raised in such neighbourhoods, we can see how they have

intensified the social patterns of violence in these families. In my opinion, economic marginalization and social isolation have impaired the formation of resources in these families and weakened their guardianship functions of networks of friends and associates, therefore indirectly encouraging the adoption of illegitimate opportunities by the young women. In this way, we can surmise that a life of living in poverty and the erosion of the social welfare state may have seriously undermined the informal controls that regulate youth violence and the young women who participated in it.

In summary, the inclination to use violence stems from the life circumstances of these young women, that is, economic and social marginalization, the fallout from childhood victimization, the stigma of being identified as “violent,” and the resulting alienation and lack of hope for the future. I have pointed out that one form that the young women’s oppression takes is abuse. Violence is a gender-related factor of their lives and is specifically shaped by their status as young women. In fact, this study suggests that experiences of abuse have been a common feature in the short span of the young women’s lives. For example, all ten of the young women had been verbally, emotionally, and physically abused, and three of them have been sexually abused at some point during their lives. In this regard, I maintain that abuse offers an important context for understanding the lives of young women who use violence, namely, the kinds of problems the abuse has generated, how they managed to contend with their experiences of abuse, and the differing ways in which they have coped with and survived those experiences.

Growing up in such an environment tends to expand the range of situations for which violence is perceived as an appropriate and often necessary response. To the extent that people lack hope, they have shorter tempers. They do not see the consequences in the same way. The end result is a situation that demands the use of violence to gain respect, enhance self-respect, and to fight for their place in mainstream society.

A vicious cycle has thus been formed. I think the hopelessness and alienation that the young women feel, largely due to the prospects of a bleak future of living in poverty, fuels the violence they engage in. In addition, their use of violence serves to confirm the negative feelings that most of society has towards this population, further legitimizing the oppositional culture in the eyes of these young women. In these circumstances, I can understand how the use of violence took on great significance for the young women in the study.

Toward a Socialist Feminist Framework

To this end, I have argued that we cannot lose sight of the economic or structural nature of the young women's lives or of the ways in which these social structures manifest certain problems and limit the choices available to them for managing their conflicts. When the social location of young women who use violence and their troubles are located within society, inequalities of class, gender, and race become apparent. Consequently, we need to discover how these structures are worked out in the lives of young women who use violence. I see socialist feminism as offering one way of approaching this issue.

According to Messerschmidt (1986), the situations young women are confronted with and the manners in which they handle these conditions are

socially regulated. When young women do engage in violence, it is related to their oppressed and powerless position in both the family and society. They can no longer tolerate the violence and abuse or be subjected to the continued hardships of domination. As a result, they turn to isolated and self-destructive forms of behaviours not usually considered criminal, such as alcoholism, drug addiction, self-mutilation, and suicide attempts. This type of struggle against their subordinate and powerless position in a patriarchal capitalist society was very similar to the young women in this study.

To comprehend this type of resistance and young women's use of violence, we must understand how the dimensions of class, gender, and race interconnect under patriarchy and capitalism to shape human behaviour. According to Messerschmidt (1986), patriarchy and capitalism creates two basic groups: "powerless" and "powerful." The "powerless" (women and working class) and "powerful" (men and capitalist class) are affected structurally by the intersection of their class and gender position in our society. Because human behaviour is socially regulated, class and gender structures organize the way people understand their circumstances and how they choose to handle those conditions.

Therefore, to understand young women's use of violence and its social control by the powerful, we need to take into account the interaction of patriarchy and capitalism and their effects on young women's violent behaviour. In addition, we need to consider how power, in terms of class, gender, and race is essential for understanding the more serious forms of crime and violence. The

interaction of patriarchy and capitalism creates positions of power and powerlessness in the class and gender hierarchy. Consequently, this results in different types and degrees of violence and crime and varying opportunities for engaging in them. Thus, to limit violence and crime, I propose that we reduce power and, therefore, class, gender, and racial inequality, rather than expanding repressive state measures.

Like Messerschmidt and other socialist feminists, I believe that adopting a social feminist perspective within our society can considerably reduce female violence and crime in Canada. While I recognize that this type of social change cannot occur over night, this does not mean that we, as social workers and helping professionals, cannot work together to undermine patriarchy and capitalism. Therefore, in the next chapter, I have come up with a number of proposals for addressing young women's use of violence, which, at the same time, are elements that will hopefully help to obliterate patriarchy and capitalism in our society. Before that, however, the young women will offer their recommendations.

CHAPTER 8

Social Work: Meeting the Needs of Young Women Who Use Violence

So I think a group for women just to sit, chill, chat would be like the best thing.... (Allison, personal communication, January 20, 2001)

The young women that participated in this research study shared many troubles in their lives. Particularly, they were likely to come from impoverished backgrounds and all were living on the margins. In addition, most of the young women came from disrupted and violent families and experienced difficulties in school. What is more, they were confronted with serious problems often endemic to women, such as sexual abuse, rape, depression, and unplanned pregnancy. Consequently, the young women felt that services and programs for young women who use violence should be geared to their unique situations and specific needs. Of course, effective supports and programs serving this population must take into consideration young women's status in a gendered society. And finally, the solutions must reflect the reality that some young women are unable to live safely at home.

This chapter includes advice for young women in similar circumstances. It also addresses important ways that social workers and community-based agencies could respond effectively to young women who use violence. To this, I add several initiatives that complement the young women's proposals. Next, the young women's recommendations for gender-specific services and programs, which specifically address the needs of this population, are offered. Finally, I

conclude the chapter with personal reflections given what the young women's accounts have revealed and the current economic situation of our state.

Advice for Young Women Who Use Violence

The young women who participated in this study have used violence for a range of different reasons, such as to have fun, command respect, solve disputes, and seek revenge, or as a way of self-defense or social control. Although the factors and conditions, which prompted their use of violence, differed from one young woman to the next, the experience of being labelled violent is one that all the young women shared. For many, being identified as violent is a demeaning experience. While the young women are trying hard to change their individual identities, they did have some advice to offer other young women like themselves who have been identified as violent.

The young women were most likely to suggest getting help, learning to manage emotions, accepting new challenges, and walking away. Allison talks about the willingness to change and to seek help:

I think the advice I would give other females is be willing to change and get the help you need and try and walk away from violence. But most of all you have to be willing to change the way you are to actually change. For me, it took a couple of years before I wanted to change. And all I did was what almost got me killed. And now, I thank God every day that I'm still here and that violence hasn't killed me yet. (Allison, personal communication, January 20, 2001)

Gabrielle commented on the importance of handling emotions and learning new strategies to deal with anger:

I would tell them that they might be violent right now, but eventually they will learn to deal with their emotions and their anger and they will not be violent anymore. They should have patience and they should be willing to learn new things and try new ways of dealing with it. Violence is not the answer. And I might sound like a

hypocrite, but I'm working on it. ...[T]here's always ways to improve yourself. (Gabrielle, personal communication, February 9, 2001)

On the other hand, Brenda suggested becoming skilled at ignoring violence and walking away from it. She explains:

[W]hen people get on your nerves ... ignore it or tell them or be assertive. Be like, "Listen, you shouldn't be talking to me that way" and walk away. (Brenda, personal communication, January 24, 2001)

In light of various resources available in the community, some of the young women saw certain programs as offering potential for change. Here is what Elizabeth had to offer:

Try to control it 'cause it can really ruin your life. You can go to jail or somebody might kick your ass and you end up dead. You know, you never know what's gonna happen to you. I would say, I would tell them to go into programs on how to get their life together, you know, because if they're gonna have kids they don't wanna be violent with their kids, cause they know what violence is. (Elizabeth, personal communication, January 26, 2001)

Dorothy also saw programs as a viable option:

I guess the best bet is anger management. You have to stick with it for a while. It's not worth it to get into fights with other people. (Dorothy, personal communication, January 24, 2001)

Some of the young women were also concerned with the long-term effects of violence on self-esteem and questioned the contradiction between being a part of a violent network and true friendship. Hein provides young women with this advice:

...[I]t's not going to make you feel any better about yourself by being violent. After a while if you're hanging around people who are violent all the time, if they are your true friends they will not stop liking you if you don't want to be violent. And if they aren't your true friends, then find people who are going to support you. And, yes,

it's not a good thing to be violent. (Heln, personal communication, February 11, 2001)

To this end, the young women's advice to other women in similar circumstances reflect in many ways their experience of violence, the meaning of violence and its effects, and their own critical awareness of the nature of violence. Still, it is within this same context that the young women offer ways that social workers and helping professionals can effectively respond to the needs of young women who use violence.

Social Work Practice Responses

The young women who call on the services of social workers and helping professionals bring with them their histories of violence and abuse, their problems with alcohol and drug use, their lack of education and job skills, and their struggles to make ends meet financially. Social workers attempt to meet the individual needs of the young women by suggesting an array of services and programs, many of which are provided by community agencies and groups.

In light of the support and services that social workers provide, the young women did have thoughtful messages to offer the helping profession to consider when working with young women who use violence. Some of the young women spoke of being non-judgmental, understanding, and accepting of different experiences. For example, Gabrielle had this message to offer to social workers:

Just because we're violent does not mean that we're criminals or that it's negative energy. Violence sometimes is not a choice. It's something that happens when you don't know what else to do. (Gabrielle, personal communication, February 9, 2001)

Still, for other young women, they believed that if a social worker had had similar life experiences, they would be more accepting of their circumstances.

They also saw a need for a greater understanding of young women and their individual situations. Allison offered this account:

I've said it all my life social workers are great. But I think social workers would be much better if they've been there and gone through it and they know how we are. Other than that, I think social workers just need to come to an understanding with the youth and have that relationship where the youth aren't afraid to say what they want. Because I've seen it, a lot of youth are afraid to say what they want to social workers because they don't know what social workers are gonna do with that information. So I think they need to come to an understanding that you know everything is gonna be okay and you can talk about, like, anything you know, that's what I think. Because I know for myself when I first came [to the drop in], it took me about five months before I started talking to staff. I came to realize that I could talk to them about anything I want and I know that they're not going to go blabbing to anyone else. I think you have to have an understanding between one another. (Allison, personal communication, January 20, 2001)

Allison raises an important point about social workers and the limitations of confidentiality. Good ethical practice involves informing the client before the commencement of any social work services of the limits of confidentiality. In this way, the social worker not only fulfills her or his responsibility, but also advises the client that any suggestion to engage in harmful behaviour will be taken seriously.

As a social worker, I have always assumed that confidentiality is necessary to developing a relationship with a client. I am of the opinion that trust cannot be fully achieved unless all personal information shared during the counselling process is kept "confidential." However, as social workers and helping professionals, we have a "duty to warn,"⁷ where a client presents as a

⁷ In 1974, in a landmark case, *Tarasoff v. Regents of University of California*, a court imposed liability on a mental health professional for failing to protect a victim from the violent acts of a client. With this decision, the court created what is now widely known as the "duty to warn" and to protect intended victims from the violent acts of a therapist's client.

serious danger to themselves or to others, or has knowledge related to the abuse of a child (Canadian Association of Social Workers, 1994, p. 16). Yet, I feel this obligation to warn undermines the very nature of the counselling relationship. Specifically, it may weaken the bond of trust between the social worker and client, especially if the social worker breaches confidentiality to protect third parties.

I acknowledge the importance of protecting third parties, however, our code of ethics provides little guidance in how to discharge these duties or how to balance our obligations to clients with other social and legal responsibilities. While there are no straightforward answers, nevertheless, under most circumstances, we must rely on our professional judgment, skill, and knowledge in determining risks that our clients pose to others and in acting to protect potential victims. Thus, as social workers and helping professionals, we can best serve our own interests and those of our clients and third parties at risk by following the standards of good professional practice.

The following account by Janice typifies the importance of listening and being there for youth:

You just have to sit there and listen to the person, pretty much, just be there for the person. You can't really tell them, you know, what to do. You just have to sit there and listen to them, be there and listen to them. And that will probably make them feel a lot better. (Janice, personal communication, March 11, 2001)

Yet, for other young women, they felt social workers should acknowledge their different life experiences and reasons for committing violence. Here, Brenda offers this message:

...[J]ust take what [we] say seriously. Being open to the fact that people have different experiences in life. (Brenda, personal communication, January 24, 2001)

HeIn, too, acknowledges the significance of checking out young women's motives for using violence:

A lot of people who are violent have reasons. A lot of people have different feelings about violence. You just need to check them out. (HeIn, personal communication, February 11, 2001)

One of the young women suggested that social workers should be more open and willing to share their personal experiences. Dorothy explains:

Maybe if they had different questions and they just got straight to the point or, you know, they as well opened up too. 'Cause from my point of view, like, from my group home staff and most of my counselors, they'd try to get to know me and after months and months of knowing each other, they're trying to still get to know you, but you don't know anything about them. (Dorothy, personal communication, January 24, 2001)

Dorothy's account raises the issue of self-disclosure, as a social worker and as a researcher. An explicit, egalitarian relationship is reinforced by the value placed on our self-disclosure. Self-disclosure allows us to share some of our relevant personal experiences and express our emotional reactions to the client's life experiences. However, some feminists have cautioned against such openness because it violates the notion of detachment and the ability to remain objective (M. Lundy, 1993). Still, others identify positive features, encouraging those aspects that yield openness and trust, acknowledge shared emotions, and can serve as a source of modeling for the client to compare with her own feelings (Epstein & Finer, 1988).

In my view, self-disclosure of the social worker can be a powerful skill, when used appropriately, and an indispensable part of the healing process. To successfully build upon the empathic connection that we have with our clients, I

think it is important to share our own feelings in counselling for the benefit of the clients. The objective is for the social worker to use her own feelings and responses to the client in order to help the client learn about herself through these responses. In effect, it is a way of expressing empathy where the client's knowledge or pain touches on ours. By self-disclosing, it lets the client know what we learned from an experience of ours that was similar to their own. Connecting with clients in these and other ways often helps them to see themselves in a new way. Thus, the particular skill to be learned is how to reveal oneself to another without taking the focus away from that person. I feel using self-disclosure that is client-focused and contributes to the client's work and personal gain is necessary for young women to heal.

For other young women, their messages to social workers suggest connecting them with someone with whom they can talk and share their troubles.

Isabelle offers this message:

Help them to give them better support, you know. If you can, look for another person that needs a friend and bring them together with other girls so they can talk. Then they can talk to each other about all the things that they had, you know. They can become good friends and support each other all the way. (Isabelle, personal communication, February 26, 2001)

Finally, for other young women, their messages conveyed the need for research and to hear more from young women, who such changes are designed to benefit. Carol recalls this point:

Just keep doing what you're doing now. Keep trying to get answers to your questions 'cause once you have enough of your answers, then you'll now how to help girls. (Carol, personal communication, January 24, 2001)

Young women who use violence have been silenced for too long. Their voices must be heard and their stories must be published. What is more, their

reasons for using violence must be reported and the social factors surrounding their behaviours must be made visible. Through participation in this study and providing their insights, I believe the young women have shown their desire to break the silence around young women and their use of violence. Their stories offer social workers and helping professionals an opportunity to understand and explore the underlying causes of their violent actions and behaviours. With this enhanced awareness, progressive strategies for responding to their unique situations and specific strengths can be developed and gender-specific services and programs can be offered.

For these reasons, I have put together a number of proposals, which complement the young women's suggestions and are central to addressing their use of violence. To sketch out completely all recommendations for working with young women who use violence is a task beyond the scope of this thesis. Nevertheless, these initiatives provide a starting point and a source of optimism in the possibility of working in ways that are explicitly geared towards giving power back to young women.

First, and most importantly, in considering some concrete proposals for practice with young women who use violence, we need to respond from a feminist framework, which normalizes their behaviour. Most approaches to working with violence that have been promoted thus far give little consideration to gender. In our efforts to respond from a feminist framework, we must first and foremost be sensitive to the life situations of young women and the role played by their behaviour, including those caused by racism and poverty, in their violent

actions. In addition, when building upon explanations of young women's violent behaviour, we must be sensitive to its patriarchal context. Furthermore, I feel it is important to have an understanding of young women's definitions of their own situations, choices, and behaviour. So, as social workers and helping professionals, we must spend time listening to young women.

Linked to this proposal is the parallel urgency to acknowledge the critical awareness (in both a personal and political sense) that our clients have of their individual circumstances. The young women in the study demonstrated that they are very capable of critical reflection and analysis of the many contradictions of their situations, if provided with tools and opportunities. Given this premise, we must work toward establishing reciprocal, empathic relationships between our clients and ourselves by responding in a positive way at the level of practice experience. To this end, it will improve the possibility of jointly creating a more critical understanding of a given reality.

The capacities of empathy and critical consciousness have been identified as critical skills in social work practice as they enhance the helping relationship between the social worker and client (Keefe, 1980). Keefe (1980) defines empathy as a practice skill that requires sensitivity to the social-structural factors that affect people's lives and seeing them reflected in the problems clients experience. Empathy is useful in fostering positive individual growth. Conversely, the author refers to critical consciousness as the capacity to make critical assessments of the encompassing social and economic context of a client's problems. The value of critical consciousness is it helps to foster positive

social change. These two skills complement each other and provide a basis for unifying social work practice. Thus, by cultivating these two relationship skills, we will have a deeper understanding and concern about the socioeconomic or structural context of individual problems.

To this end, as social workers and helping professionals, we must provide a socio-economic interpretation of a client's problems. Educative feedback from the social worker allows the client to make the connection between the power arrangements and economic forces in society that affect the lives of individuals and create the conditions that generate changes and stresses of daily life that underlie most individual problems (Keefe, 1980). In this way, social work practice becomes an instrument of change because it fosters choice and critical action and helps clients to become active and assertive in their environments, rather than the passive victims of social forces (Keefe, 1980). The failure of social workers to arrive at an understanding and concern about the structural context of human problems is a serious shortcoming because it places blame on the individuals identified as "having" the problems, rather than economic and social institutions that produce many of them (Keefe, 1980).

Second, in considering a practice model with violent young women, I believe a fundamental prerequisite of positive intervention is the inclusion of "empowerment" and "participation." The process of empowerment can be conceptualized in two ways. First, by building on young women's critical awareness, they can be empowered to deal with their situations through improving their problem solving capacities and developing a repertoire of

interpersonal and life skills. As a result, young women learn to identify and expand on their personal strengths and to recognize their responsibility for changing their behaviours. Second, incorporating empowerment into practice encourages young women who use violence to identify and challenge the external conditions of their lives that subordinate them as young women and as members of minority groups. Thus, by adopting an empowerment approach to practice, it helps young women who use violence to acquire a critical understanding of what has happened to them and to act on that awareness (C. Lundy, personal communication, August 2, 2001).

A very basic way of giving young women who use violence some power is to involve them more readily in defining their needs. As a former youth probation officer, I attended a number of case conferences with young women. At these meetings, however, I noticed the frequent marginalization of their voices. In my view, such patronizing of young women denies that they might have any conception of what they want and/or need. This sends a message to young women that their needs and problems are denied or not important. Consequently, young women are unlikely to feel that their needs or problems are worthwhile discussing with social workers or helping professionals.

The emphasis here on young women's capacities is important. Because social work responds to society's "problem" population, most methods of intervention have tended to focus on remedying deficits, rather than building on the resources of such groups. In this type of practice, the social worker-client relationship reinforces the notion of the "expert" having something to offer, while

the client plays the passive recipient in the process. On the contrary, I feel that, as social workers and helping professionals, we should devise creative initiatives in working collectively with young women who use violence. Empowering young women, providing an opportunity for them to explore issues that are important to them, and giving them confidence to participate in the process are fundamental principles of such a practice. Doing so allows them to take action on their own behalf. That young women do indeed want to talk about the issues affecting their lives, such as family, school, peers, and childhood experiences of victimization, was underscored by my contact with the participants in this study.

This points us to another important aspect of empowerment-oriented practice: the issue of reclaiming our emotions. A number of young women in the study discussed their poor self-images and how, at times, they felt depressed and suicidal. They talked about mood swings, internalization of emotional discontents, irrationality, and outbursts of violence. In our society, there is an assumption that emotional expression is intrinsically negative and that emotional responses are unaffected by social and material processes. As progressive social workers and helping professionals, we must challenge normative codes of emotional conduct. Perhaps it is rather the lack of overt emotionality among the male population, which should be problematized.

Consequently, a shift in our thought processes is required. First, we need to understand young women's emotional responses as a form of resistance or struggle against their oppressive circumstances in our society. Their emotional responses should be validated as natural and as quite rational behaviour of

surviving their life circumstances. To psychopathologize their emotions is to perpetuate the belief that their troubles are their fault. Second, we should view emotionality as positive and as a means of social communication and expression, rather than a sign of a deficient personality. Therefore, we must affirm young women's emotional responses as a comprehensible and positive means of coping with their experiences of victimization and social injustice. Only in this way are young women likely to begin to feel any sense of autonomy in their lives. As long as young women are effectively told that their emotional responses are a weakness, their confidence in their right to express themselves will be undermined.

A fourth proposal is we must look at providing community-based gender-specific services and programs in order to help liberate young women and to reduce their participation in violence. All young women on the economic and political margins have a right to healthy, educational, and supportive services. Unfortunately, traditional treatment strategies employed in both prevention and intervention programs have been shaped largely by the needs of males. For the most part, such services and programs do not address young women's problems at all. Thus, services and programs for young women who use violence need to be shaped by their individual situations and address the special problems that they are confronted with living in a gendered society.

Then again, not all community-based services and programs meet the needs of young women who use violence. The young women's accounts demonstrate that the emotional, physical, and sometimes sexual struggle for

survival at home became too much for some of the young women to cope with. Physical violence and sexual assault and threats from their abusers that disclosure will “break up the family” added to the young women’s internalized feelings that they are guilty and responsible for the crimes of their abusers. Consequently, the young women had few accessible or legitimate “escape” routes and had to suffer in silence.

In these situations, young women might benefit from intensive one-on-one individual counselling to address the pain in their lives and to come to terms with their early victimization. Where the aspects of the problem are psychological in nature, it may therefore be necessary to work individually with young women in order to bring about a change in the way their situation is perceived. For example, we would reject incest myths, assess for sexual trauma, educate about incest and sexual violence, and reinterpret family power dynamics. In other words, we may need to individualize our intervention in order to remove blame from young women and to empower them to become survivors. In this way, young women can acquire a whole new way of looking at and responding to their world. For both social workers and young women, this shared journey of empowerment can be a frightening and exhilarating experience.

Finally, in addition to these services and programs, we need to provide young women on the margins with an opportunity to earn a decent living wage. When that is not possible, adequate economic assistance above the poverty level is essential. In the previous chapter, I attempted to explain how marginalization, unemployment, and, therefore, poverty, have impacted on the

young women's use of violence. Other studies have also shown how important it is to consider the structural and economic conditions when attempting to understand young women's violent behaviour (Baskin & Sommers, 1993; Campbell 1984b, 1991; Chesney-Lind & Koroki, 1985; Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 1998).

This leads me to ask then: Why is it that so many young people in our society are unemployed? According to the National Council of Welfare (1997b), in 1996, the average number of people who were unemployed was 1,469,200. Linda McQuaig (1998), in her book *The Cult of Impotence: Selling the Myth of Powerlessness in the Global Economy*, examines the federal government's methods for controlling the economy and points to how the government usually opts for controlling inflation over lowering unemployment. While most of us would like to see lower unemployment levels, the capitalist class prefers to achieve inflation control, much to the detriment of the poor.

The obvious question is who is most likely to benefit from this particular practice? Clearly, it is not those individuals who have lost their jobs because of the government's deliberate decision to raise unemployment levels. Rather, it is the capitalist class, as owners of the means of production, who benefits from the high number of unemployed people who compete for the few available jobs. This in turn keeps the wages low and employers and business corporations happy because it maximizes their profits and wealth (Carniol, 2000).

While these gains have amassed billions of dollars in profits over the years for the capitalist class, they are determined to further reduce their

expenses by pressuring the federal government to reduce coverage provided by Employment Insurance (EI) and by urging cuts in social programs to bring down the government deficit (Carniol, 2000). According to the National Council of Welfare (1997b), in 1993, 1,648,800 of unemployed Canadians received EI benefits. This proportion dropped to an average of 1,469,200 people in 1996. An explanation for the drop is that reforms in employment insurance made it more difficult for unemployed individuals to receive benefits in the first instance. Restructuring of employment insurance also reduced the level of benefits for many recipients and cut the length of the benefit periods. As determined by McQuaig (1998), however, economic evidence shows the combined funding of employment insurance and welfare programs have contributed to less than six per cent of the federal debt. Indeed, the capitalist class has surprisingly little basis to justify their position of fixing an ailing economy other than self-interest and the need to increase their profits.

High unemployment not only puts severe social and personal stress on women, but also undermines the earlier victories they made for access to jobs and independent income. What is more, women's weak bargaining position in the workforce (as many are not part of a union) makes them probable candidates to be the first to be laid off or to settle for lower wages. Other vulnerable populations, such as Aboriginal people, people of colour, and youth, are also faced with limited options and have to accept employment at minimum or poverty wages, if, indeed, jobs are available (Carniol, 2000). When employment insurance benefits are exhausted, these people have no choice but to turn to

public assistance or welfare. Thus, with limited access to meaningful and steady full-time jobs and dwindling employment insurance and social assistance benefits, it is no surprise that our most vulnerable populations turn to violence and crime.

Reflecting on this analysis, I very much see a need for the development of direct economic policies that address those elements of patriarchy and capitalism that lead to poverty in our society. Specifically, an economic policy that would provide not just jobs, but meaningful and steady full-time employment, that increases the rewards of legitimate work for women, Aboriginal people, people of colour, and youth. While our capitalist economic system is able to provide jobs, it fails to provide socially constructive work that is safe and rewarding to those people who need, want, and can work because of the way it is currently structured.

The young women in the study talked about how they lacked access to socially constructive and steady jobs, accessible health care, educational opportunities, acceptable and affordable housing, and low-cost recreational activities. Hence, economic policies that are directed at serving these needs would provide substantial employment and/or adequate economic assistance. I am sure that if both of these proposals, that is, meaningful work and decent wages above the poverty level, were implemented, female violence and crime in our society would be significantly reduced.

Given the existing cutbacks in social and health programming and education, where will the money come from to support the necessary economic

policies? I am very concerned that the current trend toward corporatism and globalization works to the detriment of those who would benefit from these social programs, namely, women, Aboriginal people, people of colour, and youth. To counter these trends, a change in political philosophy must be attempted.

One way to accomplish this recommendation is to structure corporate taxation of profits in such a way that total avoidance will be the exception, rather than the rule. A study by Falconer (1990) on *Corporate Taxation in Canada* revealed that thousands of business corporations had managed to pay no taxes on their profits. For that reason, we must eliminate write-offs against profits and restructure capital costs allowances (depreciation). However, if the government chooses to subsidize or grant tax breaks to corporations to create steady employment, then a special corporate tax should be imposed on those businesses that create unemployment.

I maintain that simply limiting subsidies and tax breaks to businesses is one way of reducing poverty and economic inequality in Canada through this redistribution of wealth. Without such protections in place, the bulk of wealth will continue to reside in the hands of the most affluent and the already powerful, as the gap between the "haves" and "have-nots" continues to widen.

In conclusion, these social work practice responses are only the start; they are neither exhaustive nor comprehensive. Nevertheless, they illustrate that there are effective alternatives to the traditional approaches for reducing female violence and crime and that we must start working toward them now. We live in a society in which patriarchy and capitalism limits unconventional ways of

working with young women who use violence and render us powerless. As social workers and helping professionals, we must challenge those limits and develop progressive social work responses that serve young women and racial minorities, if we truly care about reducing structured inequality and therefore female youth violence. I acknowledge that these strategies are important to responding to young who use violence, however, our work does not stop here. We turn next to the young women's suggestions for gender-specific services and programs.

Services and Programs

Common themes throughout the young women's recommendations were how they could benefit from preventive-type programs and support in the way of addressing individual needs, developing educational opportunities and occupational skills, as well as creating relationships with positive peers and access to caring adults. The young women themselves have some clear ideas of what services and programs could assist young women who use violence. For some, it means anger management programs. Here is what Gabrielle had to say:

Anger management courses are actually quite productive. I've never been to one myself, but I have heard people talking about them. And they seem to offer a lot of help for people who don't, who are kind of violent, and they have a lot of anger and they don't know what to do about it, you know. I think maybe if you're gonna have a discussion group then it should be, you should show what the repercussions are of the violence they are using, you know, and kind of show people what exactly is happening because a lot of times people use violence and they don't know what they're really doing. I think that would be good for people to just reach out to them. (Gabrielle, personal communication, February 9, 2001)

Brenda offers this perspective:

There's anger management groups or things like that. I think that would be good for young women, if they're open enough to it.... Well, if the young women are open enough to share more about their experiences, I think that could help them for taking it out, like, bringing it all out. (Brenda, personal communication, January 24, 2001)

While neither Gabrielle nor Brenda has ever participated in an anger management group, they identified education about violence as an essential requirement. They felt young women needed to be taught how to define their experiences of violence, where to seek support and assistance, and how to deal with the impact of such violence.

This study underscores the need for an awareness of the range of violence experienced by young women and an understanding of its social causes. As was discussed in Chapter 6, the young women's accounts revealed a narrow interpretation of violence, which was primarily construed as physical abuse. There was no mention of sexual abuse or other forms of gender-based violence, thereby giving the impression that such violence is becoming normalized and increasingly accepted as a way of life.

On the contrary, some young women did not agree with the philosophy behind violence educational programs and pointed out some of the limitations of a response directed at their "anger" and "violence." Carol offered an interesting perspective on anger management groups:

Maybe just a group, maybe not like directed on violence 'cause, for me, when I had to go to a group and it was directed at something, I didn't wanna talk about it.... It signals you out. It says, all you people who sit in here are violent, now talk. (Carol, personal communication, January 24, 2001)

Here is what Allison had to say about such groups:

I think the anger management classes, I think that a lot of them, they push you and they push you until they can't push you anymore.... I don't know; I never really liked anger management groups. I would rather sit in a room with other females and just get to speak your mind. (Allison, personal communication, January 20, 2001)

Carol and Allison's accounts demonstrate that there are other concerns besides "violence" that they would like to talk about. Indeed, all of the young women were very aware of their situations and the contradictions that the issue of violence brings to their lives. Their accounts reveal that they have been reluctant to seek help from anger management groups, partly because they anticipate and frequently experience a re-enactment of societal discrimination in these groups. Instead, they would rather participate in a group that addresses their multiple issues.

This raises the issue of inadequacy of anger management groups. It is evident to many of us in the professional arena that traditional approaches to women's anger are inadequate. In my view, traditional models of treatment that label young women as "angry" or "violent" and that locate the problem within their biology, personality, or deficient skills, are insufficient to address the multiple social and economic forces that impact on their well-being. In our society, there is an erroneous belief that it is "anger" that leads young women to engage in violence. However, as critics and my own data demonstrate, anger and other emotions are products of social and material conditions or related factors in the young women's lives. Further, many of the young women did not describe anger when talking about their violence. Therefore, focusing on anger disregards that context and is based on the premise that young women are "out of control" and

cannot express themselves appropriately. Consequently, this leaves many people with a very flawed assumption that the expression of anger is bad and leads to violence.

Given these insights, I take the position here that "fixing" young women's anger and forcing them to return to their former "non-violent" status is unsatisfactory and unacceptable. Anger management groups that aim to reduce stress and remove "pathology" are frequently inappropriate for young women because they target only one side of their lives. The emergence of multiple and complex life activities and experiences for the young women in the study provide a sufficient rationale for the development of innovative approaches and strategies for addressing their concerns, along with the accompanying pain, terror, and anger.

As an alternative to anger management groups, the young women propose all female adolescent groups that address certain facets of their lives. They made particular mention of the cycle of violence, sexual abuse, teen relationships, alcoholism and other drug use, and peer pressure as influences that lead young women to engage in violence. Once again, we hear from Allison:

I think abusive relationships, I think when drugs get into relationships and guys are abusive, that is the one main thing. Like for me, I remember that was a big part of how I started becoming abusive. You get so used to the pain that pain doesn't bug you anymore. And you figure that violence is a normal thing. If you get beat by your parents or family, you also feel that it's a normal thing and that you can do it whenever you want. I don't know; but there's many things that can bring out violence. I've noticed with a lot of my friends or people that I do know, relationships have gotten to be that way because there are a lot of abusive relationships going on

nowadays. And also, I think growing up in a home where there's abuse; like, I for myself, and my brother and whatever yeah, that's another big part. You're growing up in it so you're thinking it's an everyday thing, it's a normal thing in life, and that becomes one of your patterns, like you learn from that. And you learn that if your family does it to you, why can't you do it to someone else. I don't know, but for me, I think that's another big part.... So I think a group for women just to sit, chill, chat would be like the best thing.... I think females have to work at their own pace and you have to be willing to change; you have to be willing to not wanna be violent anymore. (Allison, personal communication, January 20, 2001)

Witnessing violence, relationship problems, and substance abuse were also factors identified by Elizabeth as contributing to a negative environment for young women. She explains:

Seeing [violence] at home, problems at home, problems with a boyfriend, or problems with friends or making friends or, you know, problems in school if you had addictions to alcohol or drugs, violence, everything can lead you to violence. (Elizabeth, personal communication, January 26, 2001)

Frances, too, described witnessing violence as one of the influences that leads young women to use violence:

The influences that lead young women to use violence, there's so many things that could lead someone to be violent. There's like racism, prejudice, seeing your parents fight, people just being stupid, like there's so many things that could make people wanna be violent. Just like, kids are having a bad day and they just don't like the looks someone is giving them or, you know. Yeah, there's a lot of reasons for people to be violent. I don't agree with most of them.... If some little kid's dad is like beating the shit out of their mom every day, then yeah, they might think it's all right, you know, 'cause daddy's doing it, it's okay. If daddy can do it, I can do it, you know. And like, I dunno, if kids are in a home like that I think they should be removed personally. Like, I know, I don't agree with foster homes, but if the house is gonna be like that, then yeah. Like little kids don't need to see that shit, man.... Like young children should be kept young children. My childhood was taken away; I grew up way too fast, man. (Frances, personal communication, February 4, 2001)

Gabrielle provides us with a similar account:

The family can be either destructive or it can be positive. Because if your family is there for you and if they support you, then it's okay.... But if there's other problems going on ... if there's violence going on in the family, that is bad – bad, bad, bad stuff. Because it's just wrong to be able to take your, when people abuse their kids, when they take their violence and their feelings out on their wife and on their children, it's not right because they didn't do anything, you know what I mean. When somebody does that, let's say a father is beating up on his son; it creates a trend. The son is brought up that way. He thinks it's okay. He's got all these underlying issues that he hasn't dealt with and he's gonna beat up on his son, you know what I mean. It's a catalyst and it's not good. It's not a way to deal with things. (Gabrielle, personal communication, February 9, 2001)

As the young women's narratives demonstrate, many of the participants share the belief that young women who manifest violent behaviours tend to have either witnessed violence at home, or have personally experienced physical or sexual abuse. The young women suggest that if social workers and helping professionals are to serve this population with regard to services and programs, we must consider gender and their special needs in relation to their histories of abuse. The young women stated that they are individuals and would like to be treated as such. Therefore, they advocate for services that meet their unique needs and strengths, that value the female perspective, that respect the female experience, and, most importantly, that empower young women to reach their full potential.

Similar to the young women, a move to gender-specific programming and individual needs is advocated by the Office for Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) in the United States, which endorses the need for female

only programs that support their transition into womanhood. This was revealed in a recent comprehensive review of best practices carried out by Greene, Peters and Associates (1998) to assist young women in positive female development. Aspects of gender-specific programming identified in the OJJDP review included the following issues:

- ♦ taking into account the developmental needs of young women at adolescence, which is a critical stage for gender identity formation;
- ♦ nurturing and reinforcing “femaleness” as a positive identity with inherent strengths;
- ♦ providing young women with decision-making and life-skills that will assist their transition into womanhood;
- ♦ teaching positive relationship-building skills, given the importance that young women place on relationships;
- ♦ empowering young women to use their voice, to speak for themselves, and to recognize that they have choices; and
- ♦ recognizing the risks and dangers that young women face because of gender by acknowledging such issues as racism, sexism, victimization, exploitation, and poverty .

The young women also believe that supportive educational skills or vocational training would be beneficial so they can survive on their own.

Gabrielle had this to offer on employment training:

When it comes to training, like for employment, I think they should have a course for like stress management, how to deal with stress on the job. It probably exists, but I have not heard of one. So that would be helpful 'cause I find a lot of people my age actually lose their jobs or quit their jobs because they're stressed out. They don't know how to handle it and they'll snap at people or they'll shut down. (Gabrielle, personal communication, February 9, 2001)

As Heln simply stated, “I just need to get my act together; someone to help me find a job. That's all I want right now is a chance” (Heln, personal communication, February 11, 2001).

There is no doubt that young women in the study would like to be offered educational and employment support that is meaningful and suitable to their abilities. Too often, however, it is assumed that the most young women involved with the youth justice system can hope for is basic high school education and low-paying, dead-end jobs (Robinson, 1994). Yet, as Heln's account reveals, they have the capacity and will to achieve far more, if only given the opportunity.

Still, for other young women, the immediate need is to find someone they can talk with about their use of violence, that is, someone who will listen. While some of the young women were able to confide in agency staff, counselors, or psychiatrists, others were still struggling with their experiences on their own. Heln identified a need for access to a caring adult to help her mature into healthy and productive women. She explains:

Mostly, there is always got to be a problem; we don't always use violence for no reason. People need to find out why it is. I think they need somebody they know who will be there for them and who isn't going to hurt them and who isn't going to betray them. Anytime they need to talk about anything, no matter how small a problem is, someone who is going to be there for them. And isn't going to be one of those, you know, one of those people that tells them they are doing everything right and it will be okay. They need to say it isn't all right; you can't do this. You're a great person and you have so many good qualities, but you can't be doing these things to people. (Heln, personal communication, February 11, 2001)

Isabelle also acknowledges the importance of a positive role model:

Look for a special person that you can count on 'cause there is someone out there that you can speak to. Look for a friend, like there's other friends that need friends so that they can talk to each other. So what I would suggest is to look for a friend. (Isabelle, personal communication, February 26, 2001)

Alternatively, Allison re-iterates the significance of having supportive family and friends nearby:

I think looking back; the helping support that I really could have used the most would have been family and friends. I think that if I had them there from the start, none of this would've have happened. Family and friends are the biggest support one could ever have. (Allison, personal communication, January 20, 2001)

Girls Incorporated (1996) has recently published a summary of promising programs directed at young women involved with the criminal justice system and those "at risk" of becoming involved. A common theme to most of the programs is an emphasis on addressing the special needs of young women in all spheres of their lives, such as educational, occupational, family and health components.

While Girls Incorporated has sponsored numerous programs; of importance to this study are four programs, where young women are concerned. First, Friendly PEERsuasion provides assistance to help young women avoid substance abuse through education and the practice of refusal skills. Preventing Adolescent Pregnancy is another program, which teaches young women prevention strategies, including components that encourage parent-daughter communication about sexuality. It also provides young women with skills necessary to postpone sexual activity and access to reproductive health care. Third, the Operation SMART program is aimed at providing female activities in science, math, and technologies to encourage young women to pursue these important areas and well-paying careers. Finally, a more specific program is F.U.T.U.R.E. (Females Unifying Teens to Undertake Responsible Education). It provides peer support to young women in such areas as substance abuse,

physical and sexual victimization, early pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, and gang involvement.

A local program, also sponsored by Girls Incorporated (1996) in Jacksonville, Florida, that is worthy of special mention here is P.A.C.E. (Practical, Academic, Cultural, Educational). It has been praised by the United States Department of Justice as a model program, which offers comprehensive services to "at risk" young women between the ages of twelve and eighteen years. The P.A.C.E. program is gender-sensitive and takes a holistic approach. Using a peer support approach, it provides such services as life management skills, counselling, self-esteem building, community service, educational programs, and job placement services.

In conclusion, while the young women's recommendations do not fully reflect the range of concerns that were communicated in their interviews, they do suggest important areas to consider when implementing services and programs for young women who use violence. In order to begin to understand young women and their use of violence, services and programs have to be grounded in research and the lived experiences of young women and designed with an appreciation of the unique female pathways to violent behaviour. That some programs have been successful for young women at risk can be evidenced from the research conducted by Girls Incorporated (1996). Thus, the implementation of services and programs acknowledging that young women who use violence have special needs and strengths would contribute to our understanding of how to intervene with this population.

Struggling to Survive – The Harsh Reality

Despite the young women's determination to move away from violence, I am perplexed as to how the current economic state of affairs in our country can help to heal these young women, given that it is these same circumstances that placed them in jeopardy. Let's briefly review the legislative and administrative events that have taken place in our economy during the past ten years.

The welfare state in Canada has been in a profound state of crisis and restructuring for more than a decade. In the early 1990s, we saw the federal government end its contribution to unemployment insurance fund, increase the waiting period for unemployment benefits, decrease the duration of benefits for many provinces, cut funds for social housing, freeze transfer payments to provinces for health, education, and social welfare, and cap funding for social services for Ontario, Alberta, and British Columbia (Mullaly, 1997).

Further, in the mid-1990s, we saw federal social policy hit rock bottom with drastic cuts in spending and a new "block funding" mechanism known as the Canada Health and Social Transfer (CHST) to replace the Canada Assistance Plan (CAP) and funding arrangements for health, education, and social welfare. With the shifting of responsibility to the provinces and municipalities for social assistance and social programs, funding was significantly reduced. Under the CHST, provinces were given more power to determine how these funds should be allocated. Unfortunately, none of the money was legally designated for any of the three areas (National Council of Welfare, 1997b).

Without a doubt, the least popular among these three sectors is social welfare, which is likely to lose out to health and education in any competition for

needed funds. In fact, these deep cuts have already resulted in reductions in welfare rates for many of the provinces (Quebec, Ontario, Manitoba, Alberta, and British Columbia) (Guest, 1997). Closer to home, the cutbacks were used to justify politically inspired reductions to social welfare programs in Ontario. Social assistance benefits were cut 21.6 per cent, with a tightening of eligibility rules for sixteen and seventeen year olds (National Council of Welfare, 1997b). At a time when social services are needed most, agencies that many youth rely on reported reductions in critical services and programs. Shortly following, we saw more changes to unemployment insurance. The name of the program was changed to Employment Insurance and cuts were made to benefit rates and eligibility requirements, making it more difficult for those youth, who were already down on their luck, to qualify for benefits (Guest, 1997).

More recently, youth have been faced with increasing unemployment and growing levels of poverty. For example, in 1996, unemployment rates for youth between the ages of fifteen and nineteen years were over 20 per cent (Canada, 1996). Furthermore, poverty rates increased for children and youth under the age of eighteen from 14.9 to 20.9 percent between 1980 and 1996 and the number of poor children and youth rose from 984,000 to 1,481,000, the highest level in seventeen years (National Council of Welfare, 1997c, 1998a). Not surprisingly, the very nature of our welfare state itself has changed. By reducing their involvement, in essence, governments have relinquished their responsibility for assuring that many people's social rights, such as adequate food, clothing, and housing, are protected.

The effects of governments' cuts to social assistance and social programs were most obvious to the young women at the centre of the study, an already economically and socially marginalized population, who depend on social services. Given these harsh economic times, I ask, will the young women survive?

There is no doubt that the ongoing economic and social changes have had a tremendous impact on the young women, as illustrated by their narratives. Governments' reduction of expenditures has forced the young women to rely on soup kitchens, food banks, and clothing depots to survive. Moreover, the young women have had to stay at shelters or live on the streets because they could not live safely at home. Still, one of the most important lessons I have learned from this research is how extremely personally and politically aware these young women are and the level of critical analysis they possess. What is more, I am amazed by the dogged tenacity of each of the young women to rise above their often-distressful home environments and horrific situations. Most remarkable is the fact that despite their economic and social marginalization, the young women are looking to improve their life by returning to school or looking for work and have reached out for help to social service agencies, such as the Young Women's Emergency Shelter or Besserer Street Drop-In. These findings contradict mainstream opinions that the current generation of youth is "lazy" and "unmotivated" to help themselves. Yet, the young women's faith that they can indeed make significant positive changes in their lives is truly the most promising

part of this research, in what is otherwise a rather painful and despairing collection of circumstances.

While I acknowledge that the young women are actively trying to meet their basic needs, I am not overly optimistic they will survive, knowing what their personal accounts reveal and the current state of our economy. Given increasing unemployment and growing levels of poverty, coupled with inadequate economic assistance and the lack of essential social support services, I feel it is only a matter of time before these young women slip from our reach. Nevertheless, as progressive social workers and helping professionals, we must persevere in our target to provide meaningful services.

As a first priority, if there is any hope in attaining our goals in helping the young women, we must break with conventional practices and move to non-traditional approaches for more effective social work intervention. Then, we should focus on making ourselves accessible to this population. In the absence of supportive familial bonds, there was nothing in the lives of these young women to counter their involvement with negative peers and associations. Another immediate priority is meeting their basic needs, such as food, clothing, housing, and medical services. With the provision of basic needs, many young women would not have to resort to violence or often-contradictory strategies to survive. Our approaches should also be directed at making radical policy changes that would create meaningful and steady employment for all youth and adequate economic assistance for marginal youth. These measures would help to reduce poverty, which characterized the lives of the young women in the

study. The point I am trying to make is that unemployment and poverty can be contributing factors to some young women's use of violence. In addition, poverty has been linked to a variety of other physical and mental health problems, emotional disorders, school problems, and employability difficulties. Given these insights, it is difficult to imagine any reasonable justification for not making these efforts to invest early in the lives of these young women in order to reap the long-term benefits in their successful transition to adulthood.

While these proposed initiatives are only a first step in reducing structured inequality, I have confidence that they can result in longer-term social change. However, until we start to address the economic and social issues faced by young women who use violence, such as unemployment, poverty, and childhood victimization, they will continue to be at the receiving end of a system whose values render it unable to cope with their needs.

CHAPTER 9

Summary and Concluding Remarks

The primary objective of this research study was to examine young women's experiences of violence, both as perpetrators and as victims, in their daily lives. To accomplish this task, in-depth interviews were conducted with a purposive, non-representative sample of ten young women who use violence. A qualitative approach was used to gather information on young women's perceptions of being identified (by themselves or others) as violent and to explore their use of violence and to see how they made sense of their participation. The research methodology was designed to answer three questions: What are young women's perceptions of being identified (by themselves or others) as violent? How do young women explain their use of violence? What is the social and economic context of young women's lives?

In the preceding chapters, I have attempted to answer these questions by sketching a portrait of the lives of ten young women involved in violence. I have taken a careful look at the young women's experiences and tried to depict their subjective realities. My aim is to bring the reader in touch with the lives of the young women and the complex ways in which their violent behaviour becomes connected to their ongoing, everyday struggles to survive. I have tried to offer a way of making sense of the factors and conditions that lead young women to engage in violence. Specifically, I have endeavoured to show how key aspects of the young women's lives, such as school, families, childhood experiences of victimization, peers, alcohol and drugs, and self-harming behaviours, intersect with their violent behaviour.

In listening to the young women tell their stories, my understanding of the role that young women's problems play in their decisions to engage in violence is reinforced. Most of the young women were from lower-income families and two of the young women were members of different minority groups. They also came from families characterized by multiple problems, such as marital discord, parental alcoholism, and family violence. What is more, all of the young women I interviewed talked about surviving experiences of verbal, emotional, physical, and/or sexual abuse, and their resulting frustration, anger, and emotional pain. Whether they have survived emotionally is not certain.

The lived experiences of the young women who participated in this research study share similar experiences to the participants in Campbell (1984b, 1991), Chesney-Lind and Koroki (1985), and Chesney-Lind and Sheldon's (1998) studies on young women and delinquency. In particular, similar problems, such as marital disharmony, parental alcoholism, and family violence, marked the families referred to in the above noted studies.

The young women sought to escape from their problems by moving to the streets. Still, for other young women, they spent many years being shifted from foster homes to group homes to youth detention centres (where they experienced further physical and/or sexual abuse from their caregivers).

The young women admitted to being involved in a range of crimes. However, examination of the offences that brought the young women into the youth justice system reveals that they were arrested for typical female offences, such as administrative non-compliance and property crime charges. The young

women did not appreciate being labelled as a "criminal," particularly given the fact that they attributed their unlawful activities to their family situations. In other words, their circumstances at home led them to choose the streets.

The young women faced many dilemmas with their peers. Ongoing maltreatment and family disharmony in the house complicated relationships with friends and heightened problems in school. In seeking respect, the young women began to use alcohol and other drugs and engage in violent behaviours to enhance their standing with their peers. While acknowledging the consequences of their behaviours, the young women saw their actions as one of few options available to them.

The decisions that the young women made about their lives did not develop in a vacuum. Their personal accounts reveal how their choices and decisions about school, peers, and alcohol and drug use were often defined by their experiences while growing up and understandings of their immediate environments. It is also within this context that the young women devised ways of coping with the demands imposed upon them by their families as well as the larger social structures and made decisions about their participation in violent street crime.

The young women's accounts described and sought to justify the dynamics of their violent behaviours. Among the observations offered for consideration in this work is a theme that in specific environments and under certain circumstances, some of the young women had no choice but to use violence. This should not be construed as condoning violence or defending

these events or in a way pardoning the young women from accountability for their actions.

In some cases, the young women's violence emerged as a part of their efforts to cope with living on the margins of society. For other young women, violence occurred in the context of defending themselves and their struggle to survive the harsh conditions of the street subculture. The young women described the role that their network of peers and their neighbourhood environments played in their decisions to engage in violence. For many of the young women, surviving is an almost daily concern, as their social and economic circumstances place them in a situation of constant endangerment.

Data from this study point to two observations that lay the groundwork for young women's participation in violence. First, a reasonable understanding of why young women engage in violence must consider the impact of family violence, childhood victimization, addiction factors, peer associations, and their neighbourhood environment. The young women offered different perspectives on how direct a role, if any, these aspects played in their decisions to use violence. Indeed, the young women's views were frequently in opposition to the more traditional explanations of female violence.

The second important observation is that we must consider the importance of economic and social factors when accounting for young women's engagement in violence. The analyses presented here show how the young women grew up in distressed families with few resources, where they witnessed family violence almost on a daily basis. They talked about the absence of

parental or adult role models, social support, and material resources, which greatly affected the socialization capabilities of their families. As the young women dropped out of school, their opportunities for positive socialization were further diminished. We cannot underestimate the role that these factors played in the lives of the young women at the centre of this study. Estranged from their families and disengaged from their schools, the young women's access to resources, supports, social bonds, and more positive environments were severely limited. Given this milieu, it is no surprise that the young women became involved in violence.

This points us to another important aspect of this research, namely, the requirement for effective services and programs that are gender-specific. Existing programs that focus on the treatment of female crime and delinquency seldom include gender issues (Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 1998). The different gender role socialization of males and females needs to be recognized and used as a point of departure for the development of services and programs for young women who use violence. As well, programs must include awareness and inclusion of all forms of violence to which young women are currently subjected and an understanding of its social causes. The young women also suggested that any supports and programs must address their histories of victimization in positive and empowering ways.

A very basic way of addressing the female experience and giving these young women some power is to involve them more readily in defining their needs and strengths. Rowbotham, Segal, and Wainwright (1979) remind us of the

importance of seeing oppressed groups not as "passive victims," but as people who do have the resources and means for engendering the power, which all groups create as a means of coping, resistance, and survival.

Finally, in addition to these services and programs, it is essential that steady full-time jobs that pay substantially more than the minimum wage be provided to marginalized populations -- women, Aboriginal people, people of colour, and youth. And, if that is not possible, adequate economic assistance must be made available. This means that federal and provincial governments not only face the challenges of reforming our income tax system and social programs in the near future, they will also have to find ways to foster a better economy for creating jobs.

If we are to work effectively at understanding what leads young women to engage in violence and to implement services and programs that serve this population, we must move beyond the psychosocial factors that give context to their experiences and consider how young women make sense of and explain their use of violence (Artz, 1998). In spite of everything, not all people who have been abused turn out to be abusers (Gelles & Strauss, 1988). Hence, the findings in this research require further exploration with a more geographically diverse and larger sample.

Canadian research in this area is very limited. Obviously, the needs of young women who use violence do not figure prominently in the literature or in the implementation of such services and programs. Nevertheless, the particular social, economic, and structural conditions affecting the young women and their

families highlight the potential of their enhanced participation in violence. The way in which this is played out in young women's lives is a direct consequence of their structural location in society and the interconnections of the various forms of oppression they experience. The interlocking nature of these oppressions cannot be ignored, especially in terms of their cumulative effects on shaping the life experiences of young women and the kinds of choices and options available to them for overcoming their violent behaviour.

In conclusion, I saw this research study as one way to answer the question of what leads young women to engage in violence. My focus here has been on drawing out the connections between the social and economic context of young women's lives and their participation in violence. I am not professing that this research amounts to an all-encompassing theory of why young women engage in violence. More basic research needs to be conducted on the lives of young women who use violence and the various forms of oppression they experience before a truly inclusive feminist theory is written. Such an approach would also need to account for their interactions with social control authorities, such as the police and courts. According to Chesney-Lind (1989), "failure to consider the existing empirical evidence on girls' lives and behavior can quickly lead to stereotypical thinking and theoretical dead ends" (p. 19).

The analyses presented here, however, provide us with one way of explaining young women's use of violence. It was my intention to shed some light on young women's perceptions of being identified (by themselves or others) as violent as well as to develop an understanding of the social and economic

context of their lives and, at the very least, a way of responding to their specific needs and strengths that do more than add to their existing problems. To this end, I hope I have added to our newly emerging understanding of young women's participation in violence and how we, as social workers and helping professionals, can effectively intervene in their specific circumstances.

APPENDIX A**Poster**

**Are you interested in participating
in a research study on young women
who have used violence?**

THEN READ ON

What's involved?

2 hours of your time

What's in it for you?

**\$20 for sharing your
experiences**

Who do I contact?

See staff for further details

What's guaranteed?

Your confidentiality

APPENDIX B

Letter of Introduction

My name is Cheryl Nelson. I am a graduate student in Social Work at Carleton University. I am interested in interviewing young women who have been identified as violent and to explore their use of violence. It is hoped that your experiences and the experiences of other young women will help social workers and other professionals to understand and be able to provide services and support to young women who use violence.

Before you agree to participate in this research study, I would like to reassure you that, as a participant, you have several very definite rights that I would like to review with you. They are as follows:

- ♦ Your participation in this interview is entirely voluntary.
- ♦ It will involve one interview that could last approximately two hours.
- ♦ A mutually convenient date and time and an appropriate meeting place will be arranged between the researcher and you.
- ♦ You are free to refuse to answer any questions and you may end the interview at any time without consequences.
- ♦ All your answers will be kept strictly confidential, except in the following three circumstances:
 - 1) if you tell the researcher during the interview that you are being abused or you are abusing a child, she is required by law to report it to the Children's Aid Societies (CAS);
 - 2) if you tell the researcher during the interview that you have committed a life threatening criminal act (and have not been caught for it), she is required to inform the Youth Services Bureau worker who will contact the police after securing a lawyer for you; and
 - 3) if during the interview the researcher assesses you to be at high risk for attempting suicide, she will ask the Youth Services Bureau worker to bring in appropriate resources to prevent this from happening.

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this research study. Please call Cheryl Nelson at 688-2300, extension 5290 to set up an appointment or to ask for further information. Also, sign the attached letter of consent and bring it with you to the interview. Your parent(s) or guardian must sign the form too, if you are under 16 years of age.

As a token of appreciation, you will be paid \$20 immediately following your interview, regardless of whether you answer all the questions.

Cheryl Nelson

APPENDIX C

Letter of Consent

This letter of consent is a way of ensuring that your participation in this research study is truly voluntary and that you are not being threatened or forced in any way. It is required for all research with human beings.

I, _____, agree to participate in the research study being conducted by Cheryl Nelson. I have been informed that she is currently enrolled in the Masters of Social Work Program at Carleton University and that this study will take the form of her Thesis. Further, I am aware that my role will be to provide information on my views of being identified as violent and my use of violence.

I understand the following:

- My participation in this study is entirely voluntary.
- It will involve one interview that will last approximately two hours.
- A mutually convenient date and time and an appropriate meeting place will be arranged between the researcher and me.
- I have the right to refuse to answer any questions and I may end the interview at any time without consequences.
- The interview will be audio recorded with my permission; however, I may ask that the tape machine be turned off at any time.
- Following transcriptions, the audiotapes will be destroyed after the information has been used in the study for which it was intended.
- The contents of this study may be disseminated or published, however, under no circumstances will my name or identifying characteristics be included in the documentation.
- If I tell the researcher during the interview that I am being abused or I am abusing a child, she is required by law to report it to the Children's Aid Societies (CAS).
- If I tell the researcher during the interview that I have committed a life threatening criminal act (and have not been caught for it), she is required to inform the Youth Services Bureau worker who will contact the police after securing a lawyer for me.
- If during the interview the researcher assesses me to be at high risk for attempting suicide, she will ask the Youth Services Bureau worker to bring in appropriate resources to prevent this from happening.
- My participation in this research study will not affect my status as a client of the Youth Services Bureau.

- ♦ On-site staff at the Young Women's Emergency Shelter and Besserer Street Drop-In is available to me if I need help with any issues arising out of the interview.
- ♦ I may contact Cheryl Nelson, researcher, at 688-2300, extension 5290, or Dr. Colleen Lundy, Thesis Supervisor and Director of the School of Social Work, at 520-2600, extension 4399, if I have any questions about the research study itself.
- ♦ I may contact Dr. Klaus Pohle, Chair of the Ethics Committee, at 520-2600, extension 7434, if I would like to file a complaint.

I have read the above, understand the explanations provided, and agree to take part in this research study.

Signature of participant:

Date:

Signature of researcher:

Date:

The signature of a parent or guardian is required for any person under the age of 16 years.

Signature of parent or guardian:

Date:

Please send me a report on the results of this research study. (Circle one).

YES

NO

Address and/or telephone number for those requesting a copy of the final research report:

APPENDIX D

Interview Guide

A. Introduction

Probes

I'd like to thank you for volunteering to be a part of this research study. I am here today to listen to your views of what it's like to be identified as violent and to explore your use of violence.

B. General Background Information

I'd like to start off by asking you a few general questions about yourself.

1. Tell me a bit about yourself.	♦ Age ♦ Living where ♦ With whom ♦ School ♦ Interests ♦ Economic support
2. Can you share with me the circumstances that led you to come to the shelter or drop-in?	♦ Voluntary ♦ How long ♦ What has it been like for you
3. Looking at your family and the people you hang out with, whom can you count on the most?	♦ What's so special about that person

C. Use of Violence

4. The word "violence" means different things to different people. What does "violence" look like to you?

-
5. You're here today participating in this study because you or someone that you know has identified your actions as violent. Tell me about a particular incident.
- ♦ Circumstances
 - ♦ Who initiated it
 - ♦ Any weapons
 - ♦ Any injuries
 - ♦ Police involvement
 - ♦ Family support
 - ♦ Feelings during the incident
 - ♦ Feelings immediately following
 - ♦ Outcome
6. What does being called violent mean to you?
7. How does this affect you?
8. Can you share with me other incidents where you acted in ways that others have seen as violent?
- ♦ Circumstances
 - ♦ Who initiated it
 - ♦ Any weapons
 - ♦ Any injuries
 - ♦ Police involvement
 - ♦ Family support
 - ♦ Feelings during the incident
 - ♦ Feelings immediately following
 - ♦ Outcome
9. In the incidents that you described, have you ever been charged under the Young Offender Act?
- ♦ If so, ask for details
 - ♦ Other charges
10. Are there situations where you think it's okay to use violence?
- ♦ If so, ask for details
11. Looking back on some of the circumstances you shared with me, why do you think you chose violence?
- ♦ Other options
 - ♦ Feelings about your use of violence
 - ♦ Effects of your use of violence on you

D. Contributing Factors to Violence

12. Sometimes people have used violence because they're always being harassed or being called hurtful names. What has been your experience?
13. Tell me about your friends, the people you hang out with.
 - ♦ Gender
 - ♦ Age(s)
 - ♦ Hang in a group
 - ♦ Leader
 - ♦ Activities
14. Sometimes people have used violence as a way of trying to fit in or to be part of a popular group. What has been your experience?
15. In the situations you described earlier when you used violence, did alcohol or drugs play a part?
 - ♦ If so, how
16. What do you think are the influences that lead young women like yourself to use violence?

E. Family History of Violence

In this section, I am interested in hearing more about your family.

17. How would you describe your family?
 - ♦ Parent(s)
 - ♦ Any sibling(s)
 - ♦ Parent(s) occupation
 - ♦ Relationship with parents
 - ♦ Growing up
 - ♦ Move frequently
 - ♦ Family problems
 - ♦ CAS involvement
18. People deal with conflict or disagreement in different ways. How is conflict handled in your family?

19. Have you ever seen any of your family members be abusive or violent to one another?
- ♦ If so, who
 - ♦ Circumstances
 - ♦ Police or CAS involvement
 - ♦ Family support
 - ♦ Outcome
20. What about yourself, have you ever experienced violence or abuse from anyone in your family or from anyone you know?
- ♦ If so, who
 - ♦ Circumstances
 - ♦ Police or CAS involvement
 - ♦ Family support
 - ♦ Outcome
21. What are the strengths of your family? Let's start with you.

F. Conclusion

In bringing the interview to an end, I'd like to hear your ideas of some programs or services that might benefit young women who choose to use violence.

22. Based on your own personal circumstances, what help or support would have been important to you or could you use now?
- ♦ Services
 - ♦ Economic support
 - ♦ Shelter
 - ♦ Education or training
23. What advice would you give other young women like yourself who are identified as violent?
24. What's the one message you would give social workers like myself so we can better respond to young women like yourself?
25. What do you see for yourself in the future?
- ♦ What are your hopes
26. How did you find the interview?
- ♦ Anything to add

I want to thank you for sharing with me your feelings of what it's like to be identified as violent and your personal experiences of violence. Without your stories, this research would not have been possible.

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