

# Trouble in the Home, and First Contact with the Criminal Justice System

Ray is a nineteen-year-old, fourth-generation<sup>1</sup> Latina. She was born in a community adjacent to El Valle Juvenile Detention Facility. She, like many of the girls in my study, was part of a family struggling with intergenerational poverty, unemployment, and poor housing conditions in a segregated neighborhood. I first met Ray early in my research. She is about five foot seven and extremely thin. When I met her, she had dark wavy hair, but she eventually shaved her head. This new look served as a marker of sexuality and neighborhood affiliation. I would joke and tell her, “I had the same haircut when I was your age!” She jokingly replied, “Damn! Why are you talking smack?”

During our first meeting inside of El Valle, she said nothing. She walked sluggishly around class, could barely stand to sharpen her pencil, and looked as if she weighed around one hundred pounds. As a researcher new to this detention center, I wondered what was wrong with her. Ms. Sanchez, the classroom teacher, sat next to me and explained, “She just got here yesterday. She ran away and is detoxing now. She has a big meth problem.”

During our first interview, I asked Ray to tell me her life story. Her response speaks to an overwhelming theme among justice-involved young women. For young girls, trouble in the criminal justice systems typically begins at home: “My life story . . . I don’t know how to describe it. . . . Well, I grew up poor, big family, single mom always depending on partners; started getting in trouble at school ’cause we never stayed long.” When Ray was young, her mother struggled to take care of her children. She had to constantly move to escape abusive partners or to find more affordable

housing for her family and herself. Given this constant shifting, Ray did not attend school regularly. On top of this instability she, like the other young women in my study, experienced multiple forms of abuse that hastened her contact with the criminal justice system. As I got to know Ray, she told me about her path from home, to school, to detention, to community day school, and eventually, to the larger California corrections system.

Ray's path is depressingly typical. In this chapter, I draw on feminist criminology and research on gender and crime to demonstrate how abuse and neglect in the home led the young women in my study to their first contact with the criminal justice system. I pay attention to how home instability is shaped by gendered, racialized, and class-specific challenges.

This chapter as a whole begins to show the shortcomings of wraparound services. Although these services are intended to help girls at home and school, they did not provide support to the girls in my study. Once girls became involved with the criminal justice system, these services often provided punishment instead of support.

#### TROUBLE IN THE HOME

A large portion of the girls I interviewed experienced sexual abuse in the home, or in their community, or both. For the young women who experienced abuse in the home, their abusers were usually parents or other family members, as is so often the case with sexual abuse. For young women associated with the criminal justice system, sexual abuse is almost always perpetrated by a relative or close acquaintance (Winn, 2011; Winn, 2010; Chesney-Lind and Shelden, 2014; Simkins et al., 2004; Kakar, Friedemann, Peck, 2002). Scholars have also found that Latina girls are more likely to be sexually abused than Black or white girls (González-López, 2006). Rates of prior sexual abuse are extremely high among incarcerated Latinas (Díaz-Cotto, 2006), including the girls in my study.

Ray, like many of the girls in my study, experienced sexual abuse at the hands of multiple family members and neighbors. The first time she mentioned these experiences, she said, "I think it all started when I was seven, . . . when I started being really bad. . . . I went to go live with my dad for a little bit, 'cause we were homeless. . . . I had to go stay with him, and he had just got out of prison; and then something happened. . . . He molested

me, . . . and then I went to go live back with my mom.” Her mother, who was homeless at the time, believed it would be better for Ray to stay in her father’s apartment than to live on the streets. When Ray told her mother that her father was sexually abusing her, her mother removed her from her father’s house. Together, they wandered to various friends’ and family members’ homes.

Ray continued to experience sexual abuse by multiple family members and neighbors as her mother attempted to find stable housing. According to her, these events directly influenced her behavior. She began to “act up” during the times where she experienced sexual abuse.

The youth in my study also experienced psychological abuse in their homes. Debby is a sixteen-year-old Latina with a copper complexion. The tattoos on her face and arms give her a menacing look, hiding what I know is a warm personality. Debby, unlike the other girls at the facility, was a deeply entrenched gang member of a local Mexican transnational gang. During our interview, she eagerly recounted her life story, which focused largely on the psychological abuse she experienced at the hands of her father. As an eight-year-old, Debby recalled, she had one of the most frightening experiences of her short life. She explained that her father was diagnosed with both cancer and schizophrenia, and that he would regularly become psychologically abusive to his children and physically abusive to Debby’s mother.

One evening after arriving home, her father went directly into her mother’s room. Her siblings heard her mother yell. Debby said, “I was so scared. I didn’t wanna go up to my dad’s room, ’cause my dad was really scary.” Debby and her siblings went to investigate, and Debby recalled, “My dad, I guess he forgot to lock the door; and *entramos* [we entered], and we just saw my dad with a belt in his hand, and my mom’s face is all bruised up. We were all: ‘*Papi* [Daddy], stop, stop, stop’; and my dad was all: ‘What are you doing out of bed? Get your asses back in bed. Fuck you guys.’ Like he wasn’t fully there. And I got scared; it was the first time he was talking to me like that.” Debby recounts how she and her siblings saw their mother beaten and bruised. Apparently her father had beaten her with a leather belt because he felt she was being unfaithful.

Debby’s grandfather, who lived next door, managed to intervene in this fight, and things calmed down.

The next morning, however, resulted in more traumatic events. Her father decided that he had had his fill of his family and packed his things. He loaded his truck and grabbed Debby's youngest brother and sped off. He had decided to return to Mexico and had kidnapped her brother in the process. During the trip, the child's crying angered her father, so he pushed him out of the car while driving on the freeway. Luckily, her brother survived, but after this event Debby did not see her father again. She told me that, upon her father's departure, she began to struggle with delusions and depressions similar to the psychotic events her father experienced. As had been the case for Ray, the psychological abuse in Debby's family began to influence her home life.

Virginia, like Ray and Debby, experienced abuse in a very turbulent home. However, her abuse was mostly physical and gender-specific. For example, as the eldest daughter in the home, she was expected to cook, clean, and care for her younger siblings. If she did not complete these gender-specific tasks or challenged her parents, she was beaten. Virginia was placed in charge of tending her young siblings from a very early age because of her parents' alcoholism and drug abuse.

Virginia is about five foot five, a sixteen-year-old first-generation U.S. Latina with a fallow complexion and timid personality. When I asked her to share her life story, she described a lifetime of abuse and mistreatment. When Virginia was eight years old, her family moved to El Valle, California, from central Mexico. Shortly after this move, she recalled, "my parents, they drank more; my mom became an alcoholic. And then they would hit me, and Dad and Mom would fight. When I was . . . twelve to fifteen, the violence got worse. . . . My mom became a meth addict and an alcoholic. That ruined our life." The violence Virginia experienced became progressively worse with every passing year. Slowly her parents' addictions got so bad that they stopped feeding her and her siblings altogether. As the oldest daughter, Virginia did her best to feed her young brother and sister. She did this by panhandling, selling her mother's alcohol outside of a local liquor store, and asking neighbors for help. This situation began putting a strain on the lives of her growing siblings as well.

During this time, Virginia herself became increasingly frustrated and violent. She recalled that she started "boxing" her dad and fighting back

against abuse. In a separate incident, she attempted to protect her younger sister, who was in turn trying to defend herself from their mother: “She was pretty violent. She would hit me with anything she could get her hands on . . . plates, cups. . . . And then she shattered my sister’s bone with a broom. . . . She whacked her with it, and she shattered her bone.” While Virginia was accustomed to her parents’ physical assaults, she was extremely upset that her mother broke her younger sister’s wrist. Clearly, the violence was getting worse.

Approximately a year after this incident, an anonymous source notified child protective services. Virginia and her siblings were removed from their home and placed in a group home supervised by social workers. Once law enforcement officials became aware of the abuse, they arrested her mother, who was subsequently deported. Virginia remained in the group home for more than a year, after which she and her siblings returned to live with her father, who continued to mistreat them.

#### ROMANTIC PARTNERS AND TROUBLE IN THE HOME

The young women in my study often sought out a romantic partner to help them deal with the emotional and physical abuse they experienced in their parents’ homes. These new partnerships were often short-lived, and they frequently created multiple problems for the girls, both inside and outside their homes. Eventually these new relationships pulled girls away from their home lives and pushed them into high-risk behavior. For the girls in my study, a new romance represented the possibility for a “normal” life away from the abuse they’d experienced. It also allowed them to gain the emotional support they did not receive from their families. In the end, however, these new relationships seldom worked out.

Feliz is a seventeen-year-old, third-generation, light-skinned Latina. She has brown hair that hangs down to her waist and a friendly and outgoing personality. She is five foot six with a slender build. She began experiencing trouble the summer she transitioned from middle school to high school. Her home life was complicated by the problems that existed between her abusive father and her mother, who used drugs. Feliz’s mother and father fought a lot, not so much because of her mother’s drug use, but because of her father’s

infidelity and work in the informal economy. She said, “I guess he [her father] would cheat on my mom a lot; and to keep my mom settled and content and pretty much oblivious, . . . he’d bring her bags of bud [marijuana] . . . and she’d smoke.” Feliz’s father attempted to control her mother by offering her large amounts of sedatives and opiates, which he also sold. He also verbally abused her mother and her other siblings. Eventually, her family was evicted from their apartment in Los Angeles, and they moved to El Valle. After this, Feliz’s father commuted forty miles to the Los Angeles city core to continue his dual employment. Her mother became a homemaker for the family, and they attempted to start a new life away from her father’s drug dealing and indiscretions.

For a brief period, Feliz’s home situation improved, largely because of the absence of her father. Things were “getting better” all around for her and her family. Her mother, however, continued to use drugs. Although Feliz was at first too young to remember her mother’s drug use, she identified this behavior once she became an adolescent: “I noticed that my mom would sneak around the house a lot and into the backyard and stuff. Now I look back and I know she’d always be smoking bud.” The challenges Feliz experienced at home became worse when she began a new relationship with Edwin, a boy who attended her middle school. She said, “I got a boyfriend who I fell in love with.”

Feliz and this boy dated for approximately a year. During this time she started sneaking out of her home to visit her boyfriend. One evening, Feliz left to visit Edwin. Upon her return home, she found both of her parents waiting for her—they had discovered her late-night exit. “I got caught, and my dad was beating me because I was sneaking out to go see Edwin. . . . He beat me pretty bad.” Feliz’s unannounced exit, her new relationship, and her father’s perception of what he took to be her inappropriate sexual behavior resulted in a severe beating that left Feliz emotionally and physically exhausted. Her perception of her father changed as she recalled that she had had “bruises everywhere.” Feliz’s experience is consistent with most of the literature on girls’ physical, psychological, and sexual abuse in the home, which suggests that abuse often begins or intensifies after girls express their sexuality and begin new intimate relationships (Winn, 2011; Winn, 2010; Sharma, 2010; Chesney-Lind and Shelden, 2014).

If her father had hoped to convince Feliz to stop seeing Edwin, his plan backfired. She lost respect for her father and became more attached to Edwin. Unfortunately, her father's abusive behavior continued and reached a tipping point shortly after her initial beating. A few days after this incident, Feliz planned to go see a movie, but her father refused to let her leave. Feliz and her father began to argue, and she said, "Can you not be an asshole?!" This infuriated her dad; "he started hitting me, and it didn't stop till I got to my room, which is down the hallway and up the stairs." A concerned neighbor called the police, who arrived at the home shortly afterward. When law enforcement officials entered Feliz's home, they noticed her visible signs of abuse. They arrested her father and began to question the family. Feliz recalled, "I had bruises everywhere, so the only reason my mom didn't get arrested is because she was like, 'I can't leave her, look at her. Look at her body, she has bruises, she has cuts. . . . Her dad beats her.'" Since Feliz's mother was her only other guardian, the police decided not to arrest her and blamed Feliz's father entirely for his daughter's bad physical state.

Feliz's father was taken to county jail, and Feliz herself was taken to the police station. At the station she was questioned, and "they took pictures of me and my body. . . . He [her father] got charged with child battery or child endangerment." At fourteen, then, Feliz had her first encounter with the criminal justice system. At the station she was photographed and the police documented her physical condition. This information was then used to prosecute her father. She remembered this as "one of the worst days of her life."

The pattern that I describe here was the overarching narrative for the youth in my study. Girls experience abuse in the home and look for ways to spend less time there. Then, the girls begin expressing their sexuality by meeting a partner at school or in the community, and they begin sneaking out of their homes or staying out late. Their new partners provide them with an escape and the emotional support they do not receive from their families. This in turn results in more abuse at the hands of already violent parents, who disapprove of these new relationships. At this point the young women begin to act out further—mostly by continuing to date despite their parent's disapproval and physical punishment.

Debby, introduced above, similarly began dating at a very early age. She was eleven and Daniel was seventeen years old. Debby kept this new rela-

tionship from her mother, knowing she would disapprove. In the beginning, she was content with her relationship with Daniel. She said, “[At first] he would come to see me; he would buy me ice cream. He would take me everywhere with him. He was like, ‘Oh baby, I love you. You mean the world to me.’ *No sabía nada* [I didn’t know anything].” However, this changed one evening when her boyfriend called her on the phone: “It’s fucking one o’clock in the morning. . . . I met with him near the graveyard. He just told me: . . . ‘I have a surprise, but you have to promise me that you will do it.’ He’s like, ‘Pinky swear, pinky promise, cross your heart, hope to die.’ And we ended up doing it [sleeping together]. It was the most horrible experience ever. I hated it, I was crying. It was horrible. I just didn’t like it. And two weeks later, . . . I ended up going again.”

Early in her relationship with Danny, Debby enjoyed the attention and the escape from the emotional trauma she previously experienced. This changed the evening she first had intercourse. She felt coerced into this “horrible” act. Although she agreed initially, she soon refused his multiple requests. After she turned him down, he stopped contacting her. She said, “He ‘hit it and quit it’ [slept with me and left], so I’m like, ‘Okay.’ *Nunca* [never], it never processed that he would do that shit to me. . . . And I guess he didn’t use a condom on the first time or the second time, I don’t know. Three weeks [later] . . . I found out I was pregnant.”

Now eleven-year-old Debby had to confront her mother with the news. Her mother became angry and hysterical. Debby recalled that her mother asked, “‘Who’s your boyfriend? Who’s your boyfriend?’ And I’m like, ‘Daniel.’” . . . [But he was] all tatted up. So she knew he was older than seventeen. It was my *primera vez* [first time], and I’m all, ‘He loves me. He loves me.’ *Pero* [But] fuck no, that fool left me.” Debby’s mother was infuriated, on multiple counts. First, she knew Debby’s “boyfriend.” Daniel was an adult, and Debby was only a girl. She also knew this man would not or could not care for the child he and her daughter conceived. She was, moreover, furious that Debby would have a boyfriend and experience sex at such a young age. Finally, Debby’s mother had neither the material resources to take care of another child nor the space in her crowded house for another person.

This last point is critical to understanding what went wrong in the girls’ lives. A supportive parent, living in a healthy home environment, would

likely have been in a better position to deal with Debby's new pregnancy. For instance, she might have had Daniel arrested for statutory rape, or she might have counseled her daughter in the various options (adoption, terminating the pregnancy) that were available to her. Her mother also could have offered to listen to Debby or to take her to see a therapist. But this did not describe Debby's mother, who, moreover, lacked financial resources, social networks, and education. She found herself navigating the same kinds of situations that Duck (2012) describes for poor, Black, inner-city women. These women must negotiate a constant set of economic, policy, and family instabilities while using informal support. In the end, Debby's mother sent the baby to live with members of their extended family.

In the meantime, Debby experienced multiple forms of abuse at the hands of her family members, both during and after her pregnancy. This abuse started when her mom pressured her to have an abortion. Debby refused and insisted on keeping her child. After she refused to get an abortion, her brother told her, "If you don't have an abortion, I will make you get an abortion.' . . . He beat me up so many times, *pero* [but] he [the baby] still came out. It was just amazing, holding something that came out of you. . . . He is yours, and no one is going to take him away." She miraculously carried her child to full term, despite the regular beatings she received from her mother and brother in an attempt to make her miscarry. Within a month after the baby was born, her mother insisted that she "get that kid out of the house." Eventually her mother gave her two options: give her child to members of their extended family in Mexico, or be kicked out of the house entirely. Shocked by these recent events, Debby attempted to contact Daniel, only to find out that he was incarcerated in a Mexican jail. Not knowing what else to do, she eventually allowed her mother to take her child to family members in Mexico. Initially, Debby's family went south and visited the small child regularly. Over time, however, these trips became less and less frequent, and eventually the child did not recognize Debby as his actual mother. This had a devastating effect on Debby, who felt she had lost her child completely.

Debby's case also illustrates some of the gender-specific forms of interpersonal violence girls experience in the home. While Debby's case might seem like an extreme example, early pregnancy was a common occurrence

for the youth in my study. Ray, for example, also had a baby. As a twelve-year-old, she was completely unprepared to be a mother. As had happened in Debby's case, the child's father was a justice-involved older man who was incarcerated for an extended period after she gave birth. Ray's situation was exacerbated by her mother's lack of resources and an unstable housing situation. After Ray had her child, her mom pressured her to find employment to provide for her new baby; they began to fight regularly. Ray then began running away from home, and her mother eventually took custody of Ray's son, often refusing to let her visit her child. For young women like Ray and Debby, getting pregnant further complicated their already challenging lives at home. Their lack of economic resources meant that they had to stay home and deal with this mistreatment if they wanted to stay in contact with their children.

Girls who violated heteronormative expectations also found themselves in trouble at home. Bonita, for example, initially started getting in trouble in the eighth grade. She is a third-generation Latina. At five foot five and about 120 pounds, she looks innocuous and quiet from a distance. When she opens her mouth to speak, however, you know better: she has a loud, booming voice and an energetic personality. When I asked her about her experience, she responded, "I started dating, . . . and my mom did not approve, 'cause I was with a girl. And my mom, she doesn't go to church or nothing, she is not religious—she just didn't condone it." Bonita identifies this moment as key in her life's trajectory. In this case, her mother did not disapprove of her daughter dating; she merely disapproved of her dating another young woman. This event created tension between Bonita and her mother, since Bonita continued dating her girlfriend. Ironically, her mother runs a group home for girls, but this did not help Bonita. Instead, her mother used her insider knowledge of the placement and criminal justice system to punish Bonita by having her locked up. For example, she kicked Bonita out of the house and then told law enforcement officials that her daughter had run away. Her mother continued to punish Bonita for her behavior and, ultimately, kicked her out of her home permanently.

Situations like these are tremendously important. Dating other young women and getting pregnant at eleven years of age violate ideas of respectable feminine behavior for Latinas. Latino cultural ideals dictate that young

women should remain virgins until they are married, and that they should be submissive and show deference to authority figures (Garcia, 2012; Dietrich, 1998; Segura, 1993; Soto, 1986; Fox, 1983). Garcia (2012) poignantly addresses how these ideals of Latina femininity are outdated and erroneous, but young girls continue to be held to these standards. The experiences of Feliz, Debby, Ray, and Bonita demonstrate how young Latina women are punished by their parents for violating gendered expectations.

Sooner or later, these experiences begin to negatively influence girls' behavior. Often, they hasten girls' contact with the criminal justice system. For most of the girls in my study, their romantic contacts, and the resulting tension with their families, pushed them toward the beginning of serious substance abuse.

#### BEGINNING SUBSTANCE ABUSE

Drug addiction was ubiquitous among my research subjects. Most of the girls in my study began using a cocktail of psychotropic drugs, barbiturates, and sedatives at a very early age. They also experienced moderate-to-severe methamphetamine dependence. Commonly known as "meth," this highly addictive drug led many of the girls in my study to their first arrest. And because the girls in my study experienced unstable home lives, they were more likely to use on the streets, where they were more apt to be arrested for their drug use.

While high rates of girls' and boys' arrests for drug use are well established in the academic literature (Chesney-Lind and Shelden, 2014), scholars know less about how the drug addiction begins. This is especially the case for Latino and Latina adolescents. Most of the young women in my study began using drugs around the time they transitioned from elementary to middle school, between the ages of nine and fifteen. Most of these girls began using drugs to deal with trauma at home, or because a family member introduced them to drugs, or to deal with the loss of a romantic partner.

Maria is a fifteen-year-old, third-generation Latina. She has a sephia complexion and hair dyed green, pink, and purple, and she stands about five and a half feet tall. I first met her a year into my research in El Valle. She sported several punk-band tattoos on her hands and forearms, and these tattoos were surrounded by scars from frequent self-mutilation. Despite

these unnerving marks on her body, she appeared to be happy and greeted me with enthusiastic questions about my favorite bands. During our interview, she discussed the beginning of her drug use and the abuse she experienced in her home.

Maria first began having problems when her mother started dating. Maria and her mother's boyfriend did not get along and began fighting. Then Maria started fighting with her older sister, who tried to choke her during an altercation. Fed up with this behavior, Maria's mother sent her away to live with her grandmother. Maria told me, "I got kicked out of my house when I was fourteen, and [I] started drinking a lot. And I think I started doing Triple C's and started popping pills. . . . I was just partying all day with my friends, and . . . I started drinking a lot, like everyday . . . as soon as I woke up until I passed out, . . . taking whatever pills, whatever fucked me up." "Triple C" refers to Coricidin HBP, a cough and cold medicine. When taken in excess, this drug produces powerful hallucinations and numbing dissociation (U.S. Department of Justice, 2003). Maria combined this with other sedatives and pharmaceutical-grade pills, which, along with the lack of supervision once she left her grandmother's house, started her on a path to serious drug use and subsequent addiction. Without the ability to return to her home, Maria continued this behavior for an extended period, eventually squatting in an abandoned building with her friend.

Aracely is a slender seventeen-year-old, third-generation Latina. She comes from a family with intergenerational ties to a local gang. During our interview she described the beginning of the drug use that ultimately landed her in the detention center. Aracely, like Feliz, Ray, Debby, and Virginia, began her drug use to deal with the abuse she experienced at home. She first began experiencing problems when her father sent her to live with family in Texas. Aracely, who is the product of an extramarital affair, felt that she was often treated "worse" by her father and other family members and physically abused for trivial reasons. Periodically in her life, she had moved back and forth between Texas and California; and during one of her extended stays in California, she noticed that her sister and other extended family members would lock themselves in a small room for hours at a time. She soon learned that they used meth in this room and were attempting to keep this fact from her.

I asked her, “How old were you when you started using meth?” She replied,

When I was twelve. . . . I didn’t have to walk anywhere to use drugs. I could just ask a family member. I remember knocking on the door, and at first they wouldn’t let me in, and then finally they let me in. . . . I asked what they were doing, and . . . they pulled out shit [meth], you know? They were crushing it, and then they asked me if I wanted one. . . . I remember first snorting it, and I just remember that, after that, I was doing it with my friend until they [Aracely’s parents] caught me. . . . That’s when I started using drugs all crazy.

Aracely’s experiences provide us with an inside look into the beginning stages of drug abuse. Initially, she was curious about her siblings’ secretive activities. Eventually her half brothers and half sisters invited her to use meth for the first time as a twelve-year-old elementary-school student. Her drug use continued uninterrupted until her father caught her and her sister smoking together in their backyard. Infuriated by her behavior, her father beat her and then sent her to Texas, where she started using drugs “all crazy.” This drug binge had several negative effects for her home and academic life, as well as on her health. The lack of parental supervision, easy access to drugs, and the fact that family members used meth facilitated the drug addiction that she has struggled with for the past seven years.

Drug use increased drastically among the girls in my study once they began dating. While some studies suggest that boyfriends or male partners often introduce girls to drug use (Carbone-Lopez and Miller, 2012; Lopez, Jurik, and Gilliard-Matthews, 2009; Díaz-Cotto, 2006; Benda, 2005), this was not the case for my research subjects. Most of the young women first experimented with drugs with their family members. It is true, however, that their drug use often increased exponentially when they began spending time with a romantic partner. This was the case for Sandra, a fifteen-year-old, first-generation Latina with a very light complexion. I first met her in a focus group, where she discussed having been shot in the neck with a gun. Like the other girls in my study, she began using drugs and alcohol at home. Her father first got her drunk when she was nine years old. By twelve she was abusing prescription pills, and by fourteen she was using methamphetamine regularly. Her drug habit became worse when she

started dating a local drug dealer. Her new boyfriend became controlling and abusive and would refuse to let her leave the house for days on end. She told me,

He would just occupy me in here [his house]. [He would say,] “Babe, here’s a sack, smoke yourself away.” . . . [It was] horrible, horrible [pause]. He would take me hostage. . . . [I would say,] “Well, I want to go to my mom’s friend’s house only for a while.” [But] he’s all smoked out, all heroined out, . . . and he’s like, “You can’t leave! You can’t leave!” And I was like, “Okay, yes I can.” He’s like, “No! No you can’t!” And then he’s like, “If you leave just watch what happens!” . . . I wouldn’t see the sun for five days.

Sandra describes how her life changed with her new boyfriend. Initially, her new partner was fun and caring. However, he quickly became paranoid and feared someone would target Sandra because of his drug business. His excessive meth and heroin use also made him manic and violent. To keep her busy during the periods when he insisted that she not leave his home, he would supply her with a steady stream of meth. This dynamic was very common for the young people in my study. Most of the girls in my study identify boys and men as major contributors to their drug addiction.

A breakup with an intimate partner is another circumstance that can influence young women’s use of drugs. Although such partners often contribute to girls’ drug use, they can also provide emotional support to the girls while they deal with their turbulent home lives. For example, when Feliz’s boyfriend Edwin cheated on her, it devastated her emotional well-being. For Feliz, her partner had become her principal motivation for doing well in school and her main emotional outlet while dealing with her unstable home life. She soon became depressed.

Several weeks later, Feliz’s sister, Tiffany, noticed Feliz’s depression and invited her to “hang out” with her and her friends. Two years older than Feliz, Tiffany was a sophomore in high school. Feliz began spending more time with Tiffany and her high school friends as she dealt with her grief. During this time, her sister began to comment on Feliz’s depression. Tiffany and her friends were genuinely concerned about Feliz, so they tried to cheer her up by inviting her to smoke marijuana with the group. Before this invitation, Feliz had no idea her sister participated in this behavior. Feliz smoked marijuana for the first time and confided in Tiffany and her new friends

about her recent breakup. Hearing this, her sister suddenly understood Feliz's new behavior. Tiffany said, "We don't wanna see you sad. We wanna see you happy."

Tiffany's response to this information was to introduce her sister to meth. That same day, she brought Feliz to a private room in her friend's house, where Feliz smoked methamphetamine for the first time. She described her experience to me:

So they brought a pipe and crystal meth. They said, "Here, we have something for you." I was like, "What the fuck is that?" They're like, "Just take a hit. Take a hit, don't inhale, keep it in your mouth, and then blow out." I did it . . . and I felt amazing, you know? . . . I closed my eyes, and all of sudden chills went all throughout my body. [*Pause.*] I dunno, I just felt really good, and it made me instantly . . . have a different attitude. . . . I wasn't crying anymore. I felt like someone came in and replaced my emotions.

When first offered methamphetamine, Feliz was unfamiliar with it, and certainly didn't know how to ingest it. With instructions from her sister, she smoked for the first time. New meth users, like new marijuana users, often need someone to guide their first experience (Becker, 1953). However, unlike in the case of marijuana use, in which individuals learn how to interpret the effects of the drug from those around them, Feliz instantaneously identified the impact of methamphetamine on her mind. The "amazing" feeling was the release of endorphins into the brain triggered by ingesting this particular substance. Users of this drug describe this as an instantaneously "happy" feeling. Feliz experienced this same sensation and immediately shed her prolonged fight with depression. Meth and her new acquaintances provided her with a temporary avenue to escape her dejected state.

What Feliz did not realize is that meth is extremely addictive and expensive (U.S. Department of Justice, 2003). As is the case with most stimulants, users need to increase their consumption of the drug to continue experiencing the same effects that they did at the beginning. Feliz, like Ray, Maria, Sandra, Virginia, Aracely, and the other girls in my study, battled with drug addiction. And when their parents or guardians realized they were using drugs, these girls often suffered further abuse at home. Given these experiences, the girls in my study more often than not decided to run away from home.

## RUNNING AWAY AND TROUBLE ON THE STREETS

Most scholarship on girls who run away establishes a clear pattern. Girls run away to avoid the trauma of living at home. We know that running away can expose girls to several added forms of interpersonal and sexual violence (Winn, 2011; Chesney-Lind and Sheldon, 2014; Schaffner, 1998). We know less, however, about the strategies that girls employ to survive life on the streets. Most of the girls in my study chose one of two options when they decided to leave home: they moved in with an intimate partner, or they lived on the streets.<sup>2</sup> These decisions exposed the young women to more forms of gendered, socioeconomic, and racialized violence.

### *Living with a Romantic Partner*

The young women in my study often moved in with their romantic partners to escape the abuse they experienced at home. After being forced to give up her child, twelve-year-old Debby wanted to be away from her violent family. Given this, she decided to move in with the father of her child after he returned to the United States. When she first moved in with him, things were going well. He would leave during the day to work, and she would stay home and take care of household duties. Debby was content with this traditional division of labor, but shortly after she moved in Daniel began cheating on her. He also began accusing Debby of infidelity. One day when she came home after school, she found him sleeping with another woman. She said, “I just thought it was like a fairy tale. Run away with him and then you have a picture perfect family. . . . [Instead] he just started freaking [sleeping with] other *heinas* [women]; and I still didn’t leave him, *porque* [because] I was trying to get away from my mom.”

Debby describes the predicament of countless young women who run away. First, they leave home to escape abuse. Many of them move in with their partners, only to see them become unfaithful, unstable, and abusive. While Daniel paid rent and bought Debby “everything,” he also expected sex on demand and domestic work in return. As she continued to refuse Daniel’s sexual advances, he became more abusive. “It was getting pretty bad; my next door neighbor, he would like hear me yell ’cause I was getting beat, beat bad.” Keep in mind that Debby was a twelve-year-old, sixth-grade elementary school student at the time. Despite these challenges, she still attempted to attend school regularly.

Debby's semiregular presence at school begins to illustrate the shortcomings of wraparound services, which are intended to help youth in multiple sites, including home and school. Debby did not receive any type of help until she was arrested and placed on formal probation. Once incarcerated and, later, on probation, she regularly received visits from probation officers and school resource officers, and she received therapeutic counseling behind bars, but before that, no social workers appeared to ask how she had become pregnant at eleven or why she was living with an adult man to whom she was not related. We can see that, at this point in Debby's life, she could have benefited tremendously from support at home or in school. But those services were not forthcoming. As is so often the case, wraparound services came too late to help but were quick to provide punishment. Eventually, Debby left Daniel permanently and returned to her mother's home.

Debby, like other young women with few resources, was sucked into what Anderson refers to as the "Game and the Dream" (1999, 151). This "dream" includes getting married, having children, finding stable employment, and moving into a safe neighborhood where one can raise a family. This is a desire to live a traditional American middle-class life, an experience most of the girls in my study never attained. The lure of this potential life often pulls girls into the "game," which refers to unhealthy living situations like the one Debby found herself in. The other young women who moved in with their partners all had similar experiences. Their initial expectations of a fairytale life away from home ended shortly after they moved in with their partners.

### *Living on the Streets*

When girls have exhausted all their other resources, having tried staying with friends, extended families, or intimate partners, they are forced to live on the streets. Living on the streets exposes girls to forms of abuse that often includes sexual exploitation (Winn, 2011; Chesney-Lind and Shelden, 2014; Schaffner, 1998). To gain money for food and shelter, the young women in my study were often forced to shoplift, sell stolen goods, break into homes, or rob individuals. Some of the young women I spoke with were forced to work as "bait" for robberies and stickups that were perpetrated by men in their neighborhoods. Others turned to sex work to feed themselves and their drug

addictions. While participating in sex work was a less common theme among the girls in my study, many found themselves sexually exploited.

Even those girls who were able to avoid sexual exploitation faced the constant threat of sexual abuse while navigating the street. Consider Amber. Amber lacked a deep network of friends when her mother kicked her out of the house, and so she found herself living on the streets. Amber is a seventeen-year-old, first-generation, self-identified Chicana. She had a auburn complexion and strong indigenous facial features. She looked tired and worn down when she nervously agreed to speak with me during an interview. She had left home at sixteen and begun working in the sex trade to support herself and her meth addiction.

During our interview at El Valle she went into gruesome detail about the challenges of sex work and living on the streets. She also described the process of how she ended up working in this field in the first place. She recalled how her mother “*me corrió* [ran me out]. . . . I started hustling, . . . and then I got my own little job. I became independent.” This pattern is very common for underage girls who participate in the sex economy (Horning, 2013; Dank, 2011; Van Brunschot and Brannigan, 2002). In her eyes, sex work allowed her to be independent and self-reliant, a factor that commonly pulls girls into this line of work (Horning, 2013; Dank, 2011; Van Brunschot and Brannigan, 2002). But Amber also had no alternative but to be self-reliant, since she had few friends, no partner, and even fewer resources. She explained,

Let me ask you: . . . *Tu que harías en la calle?* [What would you do on the street?] *Ponte a pensar que haces cuando no tienes comida.* [Think about what you would do if you had no food.] *Comó Chicana? Ponte a pensar Guey.* [Think about it from my point of view as a Chicana.] What do you do if the landlord says, “You need to pay me rent right now”? Let’s say you have an interview. You can go to the interview and see if they might hire you? Even if your stuff might be outside in the street when you get back home? . . . Or are you going to go to the homey that says, “I can help you make two thousand dollars right now”? . . . You take the two thousand dollars because it’s a sure thing.

Away from home and on the street, she began to work in the underground sex economy because she felt it was her only resource. Hustling would put a roof over her head and food in her mouth, and would allow her to feed her increasing drug dependence. Given that she lacked a high school education,

special training, and any kind of family support, sex work seemed like a reasonable decision compared to the possibility of a job in the formal sector. Thus, she continued to work in the sex trade. The more time she spent doing so, the more drugs she consumed to deal with the trauma of this harsh profession.

Amber's story speaks to the experiences of a majority of the girls in my study. Although their hustling did not always entail formal sex work, their friends, family, and people on the street often used their bodies and sexuality for their own benefit. For example, young women like Aracely were encouraged to use their sexuality to aid older men in the community with robberies. Older men in the neighborhood often asked her to serve as "bait" for robberies by walking down the street and convincing a potential target that she was interested in sexual intercourse. She said, "Me and this girl, we went out, [and] people stopped in their car. . . . They wanted to pick us up. . . . Once we got to their house, one of us comes out and starts walking down the street; and all of the sudden, you just see the homeys [older men] rush in." This is only one of the various ways that young women are encouraged to use their sexuality to help men in their neighborhood. In other instances, young women living on the streets help get targets for gang retaliation drunk to make them more susceptible targets. Other girls are encouraged to have sex with friends, acquaintances, and family members in exchange for drugs or a place to stay. The young women in my study could not escape the constant threat of sexual coercion and exploitation once on the street.

All of the girls in my study ran away from home at least once before coming to El Valle. While some left for a weekend or a few nights, others stayed away for extended periods or were kicked out by their parents. For most of the participants in my study, being on the streets resulted in increased drug addiction. The addictions they developed on the street adversely impacted the rest of their young lives. It is also important to note that, when girls ran away, they seldom attended school—a choice that exposed them to the possibility of arrest for truancy. This finding is consistent with research that shows how girls' survival strategies are criminalized (Chesney-Lind and Sheldon, 2014; Schaffner, 1998). The girls often experienced their first arrest and booking into El Valle Juvenile Detention Facility either while living on

the streets or shortly after they returned home. Table 2 in appendix 2 has information about my research participants' age of first arrest and the location where this took place.

#### FIRST CONTACT WITH THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

The young women in my study were first arrested at home, in school, or on the street. But no matter where they were at the moment of their arrest, their experiences at home ultimately led to their eventual incarceration. Those troubles were directly connected to the girls' initially being caught up by the criminal justice system.

An overwhelming proportion of the girls in my study were arrested on the street. Some were arrested for truancy, running away, being under the influence, or being in possession of a controlled substance. A small number were arrested for fighting. The most common cause for arrest on the streets, however, was girls' participation in drug use. Their involvement in these nonviolent crimes was directly connected to the time they spend on the street, whether they ran away from home or were kicked out by their parents. Maria, for example, said, "I think I started coming here [to the detention center] when I was fifteen and a half; I got caught shoplifting." While Maria had somewhere to stay when she left her family's home, she did not have access to clothes and self-care products. Given this, she decided to shoplift, was caught, and was subsequently incarcerated. Similarly, Sandra broke into a stranger's home with a group of friends because "we needed the money." They collectively robbed the home, and she attempted to sell the stolen goods at a local pawnshop. The owner notified the police, who soon arrived at the location where she was staying. Her adult friends convinced her to take the fall for the crime since she was underage and would receive only a short time behind bars. A small group of the girls in my study were arrested for strong-arm robbery. While this group was extremely small, it is important to note that this type of crime too, which was associated with the need for cash on the street, led to girls' first arrest and incarceration.

Fewer than a quarter of my participants were arrested for the first time at home or school. Those who were arrested in the home fell into two other categories. First, some girls were arrested for fighting with their parents. These

cases involved girls physically fighting back against abuse or their parents' attempts to physically beat or restrain them. The parents, however, were usually not arrested during these altercations. It is important to note that some of these incidents began after parents had kicked their children out of the house. Some of these youth attempted to return home, only to encounter hostile parents who did not want them back. In these cases, parents often fought with their children in an attempt to get them to leave their homes. Second, some girls were arrested after their parents found they were under the influence of or had possession of a controlled substance. In these situations, parents called the police, with the result that the girls were arrested and taken to El Valle Juvenile Detention Facility.

It was extremely rare for a girl to experience her first arrest at school. The few young women who were initially detained at school were arrested either for being under the influence or for an incident related to problems in their homes. The rarity of this event is probably explained by the fact that girls who leave home rarely attend school. The criminal justice system mandates that, once incarcerated, however, young people must attend school, and so missing school is considered a criminal offense, a probation violation, and an action worthy of more time behind bars. Once on probation, the young women in my study were regularly arrested on campus or for not attending school. For the girls in my study, increased surveillance in the form of formal probation resulted in more sanctions at home, at school, in the community, and behind bars. This probation was a key component of wraparound services, which regularly resulted in girls spending more time in El Valle.

When arrested for the first time, the girls were taken to secure detention, placed on formal probation, and often taken to a group home upon their release. Once connected to the criminal justice system, the girls often remained linked to this system for most of their adolescence.

#### ELECTRONIC MONITORING AND PLACEMENT

After their first visit to El Valle, most of the girls left with an electronic monitoring anklet, a circumstance commonly known as “house arrest” or “EM.” This around-the-clock, hands-off monitoring technique—a central component of wraparound services—allows law enforcement agents to pinpoint individuals' exact whereabouts at all times. The anklet can also signal agents

if or when a youth removes it. This approach to surveillance is supposed to save local law enforcement agencies money, since it is substantially cheaper than housing youth in the detention center. Given the relatively low cost of this supervision, the probation department often allows youths to finish a portion of their sentences on EM instead of serving their whole jail terms in El Valle. Others are required to be on EM as a part of their formal probation. Having been fitted with this tracking device, the young women return either to their own homes or to a supervised group home.

While EM is an effective cost-cutting strategy, most of the girls in my study did not do well on house arrest. In fact, almost all the participants in my study were rearrested when released on house arrest. The explanation is predictable and obvious: Their home life was still unsafe and almost always unstable. The same factors that contributed to girls' initial troubles with the law reappeared when they returned home on EM. In addition, the girls in my study found it difficult to remain sober when returned to their originating community. Given that most of the girls in my research were arrested for drug charges, this last factor is extremely important. Most of the girls I spoke with cut off their anklets and ran away multiple times. Once they left home, they experienced the same challenges and participated in the same high-risk behavior they had engaged in previously. For these youth, house arrest was too good to be true: the combination of an adverse home environment and the ability to walk out the door at any time was too tempting. This often led to extended periods on the street, more time on formal probation, and eventually more time in El Valle Juvenile Detention Facility, and it demonstrates another shortcoming of wraparound services.

The circumstances surrounding the rearrest of girls in "placement" requires more explanation. *Placement* is a phrase commonly used by youth to refer to any form of living in the foster care system. Almost all the young women in my study had lived in a group home, or "placement," at least once during their young lives. A handful first entered placement when city or school officials realized they were being abused in their own homes. For most of my participants, however, their first exposure to placement homes came after their release from juvenile detention. Indeed, some girls were required to remain at El Valle after their formal release date while administrators attempted to find them a placement home.

Depending on a girl's original circumstances, a placement home might or might not represent an improvement. A number of studies have found that placement homes often expose girls to potential threats of violence (Jones, 2010). For example, researchers have documented that child abuse and neglect are often an intimate part of life inside group homes in the United States and Canada (Chesney-Lind and Shelden, 2014). In an ethnographic study of a Canadian group home, Brown (2010) found that girls constantly worried about potential threats of violence, both from other residents and from staff members. Furthermore, Crosland and colleagues (2008) found that staff members in American group homes are often ill-equipped and undertrained to deal with potential threats, further exacerbating potentially volatile interactions. This research is consistent with my own findings.

The young women in my study believed that "placement is just like being locked up." Placement exposed them to forms of surveillance similar to those in secure detention. For example, there were often cameras, random searches by placement staff, and drug tests. My study participants also complained that staff members treated them poorly and instigated fights to get girls they didn't like kicked out of the placement home. For girls on probation, getting kicked out of a placement home meant another jail sentence. Other girls had to navigate threats of interpersonal violence similar to those they had encountered on the street. They were often exposed to other young women who were more than eager to fight; with the girls' ready access to kitchen knives and other household items, these fights had the potential to inflict serious injury. Like getting kicked out, a fight in placement resulted in more time in detention.

Leaving placement was a temptation most youth could not resist. As Ray explained, "It sucks. It's tempting to walk out, because you have that ability. You're scared to walk out. You can walk out, but if you do you're in trouble, you're a runaway." Ray and many of the other girls decided to run away from placement homes; however, once on the street they followed the same familiar patterns. Because they receive little therapy or other services to address their prior abuse, psychological trauma, and drug addiction, it is no surprise that most of these young women relapse into criminal behavior on multiple occasions. On average, the girls in my study were incarcerated on

seven separate occasions, and some were arrested as many as nineteen times. Once they were on probation, any slipup resulted in a visit to secure detention. The pattern of surveillance, interpersonal violence, and punishment was ubiquitous in the lives of girls in my study. Taken as a whole, these events led the girls to become caught up in the criminal justice system.