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Randilee Pearl, 18, who once fought teen girls, said she's working with DYS to help troubled teens. (Globe Photo / Zara Tzanev)

## Violence raging among teen girls

By Suzanne Smalley and Ric Kahn, Globe Staff | June 20, 2005

In April, more than a dozen girls allegedly surrounded a 14-year-old as she left a Milton T station and watched as four 15-year-old girls kicked her in the head and left her bleeding on the tracks.

This month, two Hyde Park High School students reported another group of female teenagers to MBTA transit police, alleging that the girls had pulled their hair and punched and kicked them while they rode the bus home.

Last week, a 13-year-old girl allegedly punched and kicked a classmate in the face at Martin Luther King Jr. Middle School because she was annoyed the girl was wearing a short skirt.

Boston school police filed a report stating the girl also bit her teacher's finger and flailed wildly before she was handcuffed.

These cases are just a few of the hundreds of violent episodes among girls in Boston every year, youth workers and public safety officials said. Many advocates said the criminal justice system has not developed programs to deal with teenage girls, deepening an already significant crisis.

"It's alarming, and we have to pay attention," said Sandra McCroom, executive director of Roxbury Youthworks, Inc., a community organization that helps troubled teenagers. "Young women are crying out for help."

The numbers tell part of the story: The number of girls arraigned in Dorchester District Court for violent crimes increased from 120 in 2000 to 196 in 2004. During the same period, the number of girls arraigned for all crimes rose from 197 to 320.

The number of girls in the custody of the state Department of Youth Services increased from 169 in January 1995 to 442 on May 1.

As of April 30, 54 percent of the girls in DYS custody awaiting trial were facing charges for violent crimes. Of the 1,458 females DYS detained in 2002, only 47 percent were accused of violent crimes.

Boston police do not break down crime statistics by gender, but the MBTA has started tracking violence among girls. Paul MacMillan, deputy chief of the MBTA transit police, said officials decided to launch the effort about a month ago after they noticed an increase in fights among female students in transit stations.

"Anecdotally, we see there's an increase," MacMillan said. "We're tracking it to validate whether there's an actual concern."

DYS recently created a position, so that one person can coordinate all services for teenage girls in custody. It also improved psychiatric services available to young women, recognizing that much of the violence among teenage girls is driven by abuse and trauma.

Roxbury Youthworks opened a drop-in center for troubled teenage girls in January, but McCroom said that grant money for gender-specific programs is scarce.

John Sisco, chief of Boston schools police, said his officers also are recording a 5 percent to 10 percent increase in fights among girls -- a surge he said is a result of popular culture influences. "Girls of the 21st century are affected by the same music videos and video games that boys are," Sisco said. "We do see a reflection of that in how the girls act. . . .We have more and more girls who are very willing to be physical."

Randilee Pearl, 18, said she has fought with more than two dozen girls throughout her teenage years. She said the fights have usually been over minor things, such as a dirty look or an insult.

"My dad was abusive to my mom -- that's where it started for me," Pearl said. "I was angry inside so I . . . fought with a lot of girls. They could look at me wrong, and I'd fight them. . . . Then I wasn't the only one hurting."

After taking on five girls and breaking one's nose, Pearl was kicked out of school in 2001, she said. She was committed to DYS several times and was convicted in juvenile court three times on assault charges and once for assault and battery with a dangerous weapon. Now, she is trying to

start over. She said has recently graduated from high school and plans to attend Fitchburg State College on a full scholarship provided by the state Department of Social Services.

Deborah Prothrow-Stith, a professor of public health practice at Harvard University and the author of a new book that examines female violence, said she believes the high number of girls in the juvenile justice system is a result of a culture that celebrates savagery in superheroes and action stars. "It's our 'make-my-day' mentality," she said. "During the last decade, we have really increased the female violent superhero. . . . We've been socializing our girls more like our boys, and now they are showing these signs of violence."

But Laura Prescott, head of DYS female services, contends that more girls are in custody because of changes in the juvenile justice system and an increasingly punitive society, she said.

"Because of zero tolerance, these girls are getting arrested," Prescott said. "Police are treating them differently."

Lisa Maga, a DYS counselor, said more girls are hurting others with knives, box-cutters, and other weapons, and more are carrying guns. She cites worsening social problems. "Some of the girls have been molested, their parents are drug-addicted," Maga said. "With girls, it's more emotion-driven violence."

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