



Ecological Ruptures and Strain: Girls, Juvenile Justice, and Phone Removal

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Abstract

Girls in the juvenile justice system routinely have their cell phones and internet access removed as a part of court orders. Building on feminist criminology and ecological systems theory, this paper will demonstrate that phone removal causes a rupture of girls' digital ecology. This rupture exacerbates strains conducive to crime and victimization. Findings are generated from an ethnographic study that took place in a Northeastern United States city. Forty-two girls took part in focus groups and a series of interviews, and 22 practitioners took part in semi-structured interviews. This research shows that phones act as a positive and protective force supporting girls through feelings of safety, helping them cope with challenging events at home and on the street. Understanding the phone as a part of a broader ecology contextualizes why girls would subsequently commit crimes to restore their digital ecology.

Keywords

Girls; juvenile justice; phones; social ecology.

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Introduction

Girls in the United States (US) juvenile justice system (JJS) are largely made up of those who commit minor nonviolent “offenses” (Ehrmann, Hyland and Puzanchera 2019), which, if committed by a male, are likely to receive little, if any, punishment (Chesney-Lind 1989). Feminist criminologists have argued that the increase in girls entering the JJS can be explained primarily through the paternalistic and sexist structure of the system itself, which treats girls more harshly than boys at each stage (Anderson, England and Davidson 2017; Belknap 2020; Chesney-Lind 1989; Chesney-Lind and Sheldon 2014; DeHart and Lynch 2021; Lopez 2017; Schaffner 2006; Sharpe 2012), including arrest, adjudication, disposition, and sentencing (Carr et al. 2008). Patriarchal trends within the system result in the criminalization of girls’ victimization, in particular sexual exploitation (Chesney-Lind 1989; DeHart and Lynch 2021; Schaffner 2006; Sharpe 2012).

As reflected in this study, girls in the JJS are more likely to be girls of color (Ehrmann, Hyland and Puzanchera 2019), come from a low socioeconomic standing, have experienced trauma, and have been convicted of status offenses, such as running away or curfew violations (acts that are not treated as criminal acts when a person is an adult) (Ehrmann, Hyland and Puzanchera 2019). As reflected in this study, girls in the JJS are more likely to be girls of color, accounting for up to 54% of all delinquency cases (Ehrmann, Hyland and Puzanchera 2019).

This study builds on the insights of feminist criminology by exploring court-ordered digital access bans imposed on girls but not boys. In response to delinquency and risk of sexual victimization, girls’ phones and internet access according to practitioners are removed “for the girls’ protection” via court orders. By combining the social-ecological and general strain theories, this study provides a unique understanding of girls’ digital contexts and causes of delinquency as an unintended consequence of the court’s policy of phone removal.

Girls, Phones, and Risk

There is a dearth of literature about the digital lives of girls involved in the JJS. Available research has centered around sexting and filmed fights. Concerns regarding girls’ digital behavior are highly gendered. Research examining sexting has reflected the moral panic about the sexualization of girls, particularly through social media and the perceived “dangers of sexual predators everywhere” (boyd 2014: 100). By contrast, research examining filmed fights has registered concerns that girls are becoming more like boys because fighting threatens femininity (Carrington 2013; Larkin and Dwyer 2016). Reflective of how the JJS has historically treated girls who are involved in either sexual activity or violence, girls are punished more harshly for their involvement in these activities because they transgress normative gender boundaries (Belknap 2020; Carr et al. 2008; Chesney-Lind and Sheldon 2014). Sexting studies have provided evidence that international courts penalize female teenage sexuality harshly through laws created to punish adult sex offenders (Gong and Hoffman 2012; Hasinoff 2015). The filmed fight literature has assessed the often harsh audience reaction to girls’ fights and how the harm suffered has become a source of entertainment (Carrington 2013; Hitchens 2019; Larkin and Dwyer 2016; Rhodes and Hunt 2018) that “incites and rewards girls’” violence (Carrington 2013: 1).

By focusing on risks, the many benefits of phone and internet adoption for young people have been obscured in the extant literature. This harm-based focus is reflective of “mobile panics” (Goggin 2006), whereby phones are associated with broader social harm and threats to social order primarily centered around “ill-mannered, feckless, and subversive young people” (Goggin 2006: 124). Historically, cell phone and internet cultures have raised anxieties about their ability to corrupt young people and threaten sociability. Because phones are integrated into young people’s lives, digital access has been identified as a threat to traditional forms of authority and supervision (Goggin 2006).

There is no denying that phone use does pose a risk to girls. Girls in digital forums face an increase in harrasment (Hutchings and Chua 2016), and increased access to negative peer influence online has also been identified as a threat to young people’s rehabilitation (Lim et al. 2013a, 2013b). However, phones

also provide an opportunity for personal empowerment. Studies regarding girls of color from low-income backgrounds in several African countries have demonstrated that girls benefit from the increased social connection, education and wealth opportunities, support, and information offered by smartphones (Porter et al. 2020). However, digital opportunities can be suffocated by broader patriarchal structures (Porter et al. 2020). Lane (2018) found that girls in Harlem played a central role on the “digital street,” where girls play a caretaker role for boys in the neighborhood, offering support and conflict management. Girls also used phones to keep themselves safe from on-street harassment. Studies of adolescents have demonstrated that the constant connection that phones offer is crucial to social bonding, building intimacy, emotional expression, building self-esteem, and self-care (Boase and Kobayashi 2008; Wilson 2016). Studies with JJS-involved youth have provided comparable findings, with digital access forming an important part of young people’s identities, friendships (Lim et al. 2013b), and social support networks (Barn and Tan 2012). Less is known about the effects of removing digital access from young people.

Digital Access Bans

Literature regarding the limitation of digital access has focused primarily on the parole conditions of adult sex offenders in the US (Hutt 2019; Renberg and Sbrano 2021). Digital access is limited or denied for sex offenders as crime prevention to protect minors. Complete digital bans have recently been challenged, citing that, unlike the conditions of the 1990s, when courts began banning access, digital access is now essential for everyday life and should be identified “as a right, not a privilege” (Renberg and Sbrano 2021: 181). The Supreme Court of the US recognized access to the internet as a part of the First Amendment (Renberg and Sbrano 2021). Because the internet is now a key component of social, economic, and political life, removing digital access is thought to prevent successful reentry to society for offenders (Hutt 2019; Renberg and Sbrano 2021). To the author’s knowledge, digital access bans have not been evaluated for effectiveness and have yet to be addressed within the juvenile population.

This study addresses these lacunae by asking 42 girls and 22 youth justice practitioners what the role of phones and social media was in the girls’ JJS experiences. In response, girls discussed court-imposed digital bans and how bans affected their lives. Practitioners were asked why and how digital bans were imposed by the court.

Theoretical Framework

This study connects Johnson and Pupilampu’s (2008) concept of ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner 1992) with feminist criminology (Belknap 2020; Chesney-Lind and Sheldon 2014) and general strain theory (GST) (Agnew 1992). Together, these theories provide a contextualized understanding of girls’ digital ecologies.

Child psychologists Johnson and Pupilampu (2008) argued that a techno-subsystem should form part of the micro-system (see Figure 1). This system should include a child’s “interaction with both living (peers) and non-living (hardware) elements of communication, information, and recreation technologies in immediate and direct environments” (Johnson and Pupilampu: 23). They contended that an ecological analysis is incomplete unless it includes a description, understanding, and comparison of internet use in the child’s immediate micro-level environments. This paper builds on Johnson and Pupilampu’s (2008) “techno-subsystem” to demonstrate how the digital ecology penetrates the entire ecological system.

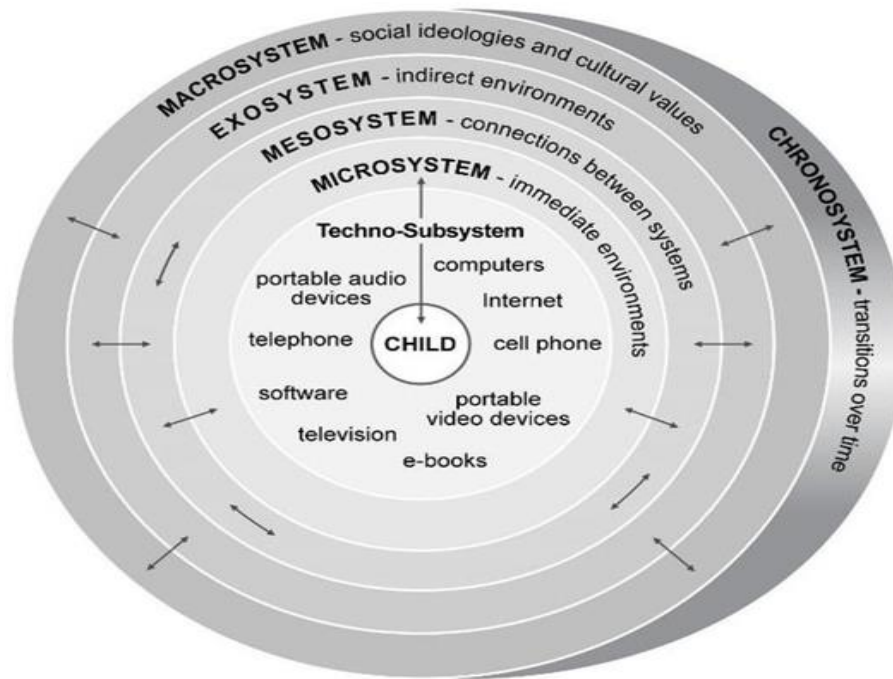


Figure 1. The Ecological Techno-Subsystem (Johnson and Pupilampu 2008: 19)

To provide a deeper understanding of girls’ experiences of criminalization and victimization, feminist criminologists have long argued that we must consider the ecological context of girls’ lives (Belknap 2020; Chesney-Lind and Sheldon 2014; Lopez 2017). To do this, we must examine how girls’ immediate environments, relationships, and treatment within the JJS are shaped by intersections of patriarchy, sexism, homophobia, ageism, and racism (Belknap 2020; Chesney-Lind and Sheldon 2014; DeHart and Lynch 2021; Lopez 2017). This need for contextualization can be extended to “cybercultural” activities such as violence (Carrington 2013).

GST has evolved to incorporate more intersectional thinking, whereby strains can be considered experiences that are affected by gender, race, and socioeconomic status (Belknap 2020). Taking a more gendered approach to strain theory mirrors findings from feminist scholars establishing that for girls, “aversive conditions at home, work and in their neighborhoods” (Broidy and Agnew 1997: 278), which includes emotional, physical, sexual abuse and neglect, form strains that lead to delinquency for girls or reactions to trauma that are criminalized (e.g., running away or parental disobedience) (Broidy and Agnew 1997). GST suggests that negative events that cause stress and strain can lead to delinquent or criminal behavior. According to GST, the presence of negative influences, loss of positive influences, and failure to achieve goals are the three sources of psychological strain that can lead to delinquency (Agnew 1992). Strain theory is used in this study to broaden insights into why the interruption (or rupture) of girls’ digital ecology may result in further involvement in crimes.

Current Study

This study took place in a Northeastern US city. Like other industrial cities, the research site has high levels of unemployment (Wilson 1996), higher levels of poverty compared to the national average (US Census 2019), and crime and violence rates that exceed national averages (Federal Bureau of Investigation 2016). This study received a full-board Institutional Review Board approval. Participants under the age of 18 years and their parents signed informed consent forms. Each participant filled out a card detailing their demographic information, which included their name, chosen pseudonym (to protect confidentiality), age, race, ethnicity, and gender.

The girls in the study were a sample of voluntary participants attending court-mandated after-school programs. Snowball sampling was also used. Overall, 42 girls aged 12 to 21 years who were involved with the courts took part in this study. This number of participants represents 68% of girls that were on probation in the county at the time of the study (May 2019 to March 2020).

As demonstrated in Table 1, African American girls were overly represented in this research. This is reflective of the JJS at large, where they make up over a third of all delinquency cases (Ehrmann, Hyland and Puzanchera 2019). To further situate the girls' experiences, Table 2 displays contextual information provided by the girls and practitioners.

Table 1. Girls' demographics

Girls (N=42)	Number	Percentage
Age		
12 —15	20	48
16 —19	20	48
20 —21	2	4
Sex		
Female	42	100
Race		
African American	24	57
African American and White	6	15
African American and Latina	6	15
White	2	4
Ethnicity		
Latina	8	19

Note. Totals exceed 100% because four girls identified themselves as Mixed African American and Latina with a Latina ethnicity.

Table 2. Girls' contextual information

Girls (N=42)	Number	Percentage
Experience of abuse, neglect and/or contact with welfare	38	90
Witness to shooting	36	86
Friend/family member killed	32	75
Family member incarcerated	29	70
Involvement in a violent offense (filmed girl fight)	40	95
Average years within justice system	2.5	n/a
Average age of first contact with justice system	13	n/a
Most frequent charges	Simple assault (minor injury or threat of violence), terroristic threats, violation of probation, financial fraud	n/a

As displayed in Table 3, 22 JJS practitioners took part in semi-structured interviews. Participants responded to requests made at meetings or via emails to JJS organizations. Although men were invited to take part in the research, only those identifying as women responded. Respondents included probation officers, correctional officers, court staff, youth workers, county JJS leads, and advocates. All practitioners had worked in the JJS for at least two years.

Table 3. Practitioner demographics

Practitioners (N=22)	Number	Percentage
Sex		
Female	22	100
Race		
African American	17	75
White	3	15
Ethnicity		
Latina	2	10
Occupation		
Justice system staff	12	55
Non-justice system staff	10	45

Research Design

Building on previous studies with girls in the JJS (Belknap, Holsinger and Dunn 1997; Lopez 2017; Schaffner 2006; Sharpe 2012), this study utilized qualitative feminist methods that provided a supportive environment for girls to be heard and that fostered a reflexive awareness of interviewer–subject power differentials (Belknap, Holsinger and Dunn 1997). Thirty-one girls took part in six focus groups, with an average number of six participants in each group. Focus groups were conducted to provide spaces where girls had the opportunity to discuss experiences where peer support was available. Focus groups were held with girls who were known to each other and were already receiving group-based interventions, which supported their comfort levels with each other.

Eleven additional girls took part in a series of semi-structured interviews conducted over a six-month period. Repeat interviews allowed rapport to be built over time and enabled the study to follow girls throughout different stages of the JJS. The girls in the focus groups helped identify patterns and trends of cybercrime, victimization, and treatment within JJS while providing multiple views on specific social media events. The girls in the interviews gave more detailed personal accounts of their own life experiences. The girls were reminded of the limits to confidentiality required by Institutional Review Board protocols in each focus group and interview. They were aware that if they discussed someone harming them, their intention to harm someone else, or their participation in an unreported crime, the researcher was mandated to report this information.

Focus groups and some interviews took place at youth centers and/or after-school programs. Other interviews occurred at court-mandated residential settings that girls were relocated to during the course of the study. Interviews with practitioners were conducted at places of work. The data were triangulated across focus groups and interviews. All interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Five girls involved in interviews had the opportunity to observe their transcripts and participate in the analysis process. Participants were offered the opportunity to listen to sections of the transcripts to ensure accessibility. The girls actively selected quotes they felt were important and representative of their experiences. Although the transcript review was a lengthy process, the girls seemed to enjoy this opportunity, remarking on how much “work” we had done together. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it was not possible to share the transcripts with all participants. It was difficult to keep track of participants digitally because they did not have access to their phones; thus, it was not possible to continue the research.

Using an inductive grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss 2017), data were triangulated, organized, and coded via NVivo 12. Transcripts were first coded for emerging themes and then recoded for more specific details concerning each theme.

Findings

The review of the findings begins with practitioners introducing and contextualizing digital access bans. Practitioners explain why digital bans are used by the courts primarily for girls. This is followed by girls' describing how multifunctional smartphones facilitate their digital ecology, which provides social and emotional support, feelings of safety, and the ability to navigate adverse environments. The section concludes with girls discussing how digital lockdowns have the unintended consequence of leading them further into crimes and victimization to restore access to their digital ecology.

Why Practitioners Favor Digital Bans

The courts had banned digital access for 70% of girls in this study. As an informal detention alternative, phone removal was paired with house arrest, curtailing the physical and digital connections of 15% of girls in the study. More broadly, practitioners stated that house arrests involved digital bans for girls but not boys. Practitioners' views and conceptualizations of digital spaces permeate girls' exo-systems.

Girls in this study had their phones removed at different stages of JJS involvement. A quarter of girls had their phones taken by schools or the police at the point of arrest. In almost three-quarters of the phone removal cases, restrictions on phone and internet access were written into the court orders at the point of adjudication. The courts sent a copy of the orders to the support services offering interventions for the girls. Service providers were expected to uphold the digital ban, with exceptions allowed for homework. Practitioners could not state when the phone removal policy began or why. Phone removal was not linked to specific offenses that were digitally facilitated or applied to combat cybercrime. According to practitioners, there were no clear policies or guidelines from the courts about why a digital ban was imposed, when it would be lifted, or how this intervention would be evaluated for effectiveness.

Practitioners held deeply negative impressions of phones, which provides context as to why digital bans were enforced so readily by the courts. Practitioners stated in interviews that "phones are evil" and that "social media just gets girls in trouble." Practitioners considered phones "a danger" to girls and "something girls couldn't handle," with one practitioner even stating that "giving a girl a phone is like giving her a loaded gun." All practitioners were in favor of the phone removal policy. For instance, one remarked that "if it weren't for phones, their job would be easier," indicating that removing the phone "makes it easier to control girls." Situating phones within the paternal dynamics of the JJS, it is evident that taking away phones is a form of digital lockup justified through protectionist discourse related to age and gender. The phone removal policy was normalized through the perceived pursuit of safety for girls only: boys' phones were not removed.

Similar to practitioners working with girls in other studies, practitioners often considered girls as inept and incapable of organizing themselves, avoiding conflict, or, above all, managing risks (Burson, Godfrey and Singh 2019; Schaffner 2006; Sharpe 2012). The way in which practitioners described girls' inability to manage a phone or protect themselves resonates with other studies conducted with practitioners. These arguments have been used to also justify exerting control over girls (Anderson, England and Davidson 2017; Burson, Godfrey and Singh 2019; Lopez 2017). The practitioners held the view that if a girl had access to a phone, they would choose to do something that is harmful to themselves, particularly relating to sexual victimization. Echoing previous studies by feminist criminologists, punishing girls for sex involvement or sexual victimization is a consistent theme in the JJS and is rooted in historical patriarchal macro views (Belknap 2020; Chesney-Lind 1989; Sharpe 2012). The heightened fear concerning girls and sex trafficking being linked to digital access is a common concern for girls in socially deprived areas (Porter et al. 2020).

Practitioners' inability to understand phones as anything but a negative force inhibiting them from identifying how a phone could be a device for preventing offending. Like JJS practitioners from the United Kingdom, participants did not routinely use digital spaces with their young people (Barn and Barn 2019). Practitioners found it difficult to understand why phones were so important for girls, which led to them

minimizing girls' experiences causing numerous misunderstandings and tension between girls and keyworkers. The use of smartphones as a positive tool is complex and multifaceted, as is explored in the following sections.

Personal Safety

Safety fears based on histories of trauma, living in unsafe neighborhoods, and experiences with community violence were the primary reasons respondents said they needed a smartphone. Living in an unsafe environment and experiencing prior victimization and trauma is common for girls in the JJS (Belknap 2020; Chesney-Lind and Sheldon 2014; DeHart and Lynch 2021; Lopez 2017). These conditions exacerbate strain for girls (Broidy and Agnew 1997). Respondents were not just concerned with their own personal safety but with the well-being of friends and family.

Talking or Facetiming a friend when alone in a public space offered girls' comfort, as described in a focus group:

I call my friend when I am walking home; there are some weirdos out there. At least if I'm talking to someone, I feel safer. (Eve)

Yeah, especially at night, or not even night, but when it's dark in the winter, I never move to the next place without talking to someone on the phone. (Amina)

For me, it's more like when it's all that, dark and weirdos, but when you have to walk past the empty lots, [it] freaks me out, so I have to call someone. (Carmen)

Many of the themes the girls were talking about—darkness, empty lots, and being alone—can be interpreted as gendered fears of “stranger danger” and relate to rape culture. Fear and danger were part of the girls' everyday experiences traversing the city. It is not this study's objective to determine whether speaking on the phone actually makes people safer; however, the feeling of safety it provided the girls helped them navigate their environment.

As another safety precaution, respondents utilized Global Positioning System connectivity on their phones to share their geographic location through the Life360 app or Google Maps with friends and family members: “So, say, like, say you in a cab, so say you peeps something funny. I'll text the group chat like ‘yo, watch my location’ cause, I don't know, like this cab on some funny stuff” (Zee). They also talked about how taking a picture of someone following them or a license plate could be protective for them because “the guy knows then you had evidence” (Amina). The dangers faced by girls in this space were not just felt at an individual level. It was also a concern the girls expressed for others in their micro-system. Respondents wanted to observe the locations of their sisters, friends, and mothers in the event they needed help. If youths were out of contact with friends and family, it was a source of worry for them.

Being contactable with others was important for girls' micro- and meso-systems. Interactions between the perceived or active dangers in the environment concerned the girls' family and friends when they were not with them. The girls frequently registered their concerns regarding being kidnapped. There were, in fact, kidnappings in the area during the time of this research. Victims were held for ransom, and pictures were put on social media as evidence of the kidnapping. The girls would mitigate the concerns of others by ensuring that they were personally contactable. For example:

I could be walking to school; somebody could kidnap me ... Somebody could come up to me or anything ... That's all I use my phone [for], to keep [in] contact with family members. My mom text[s]; [I] tell her how I been. So, she at work, I'll be like “oh mom, I at here,” let her know where I'll be at. So, [if] anything happened, she'll know. (Jessica)

Jessica was responding to her mother's concerns about the environment and her daughter's perceived risks within that space when she was not present. In a sense, this is the mother's exo-system in which Jessica is taking part. The digital exchanges between the mother and daughter helped manage stress for both parties. This reciprocal reassurance was also captured by Paris, who was no longer able to live with her family but still felt their comfort digitally: "I'll say more about my grandmom though cause I'm always on the phone with her, so if she don't hear from me, I don't hear from her, I'll blow up her phone, and she will blow up mine."

Emma provided another example of the importance of being contactable, which incorporated her history of being kidnapped:

My dad, my mom, if one of them call[s] me and if they don't get a hold of me, that's more or less what's, like, what's going to go through their head? They can't get a hold of their child. They're going to probably go call in the whole state to look for me again.

Friends also took part in digital reassurance and safety checks:

I mean, I know if I'm off my phone for more than like three hours at a time, I'll have my one friend Eli; he will blow up my phone for 20 minutes straight. He won't even spell a whole text. He'll spell the text, bubble out letter by letter, send letter by letter like H I, and then a whole space. (Eniyah)

When talking about a friend who "the court said was not allowed no electronics," Breea explained the effects of not being able to take part in these safety checks with her friend:

I worry about her all the time. But, like, I was going to text her and see if she gets it. So, like, at least we can talk because I haven't saw her or talked to her yet ... Like, yeah, I want to talk to her because she, she's a mess. I don't know what's going on. I really don't ... But, like, I talked to her mom like every day. And I was telling her, like, "I saw her on there" [social media]. She said, "that's crazy." Like, she really shouldn't be on there, and I shouldn't either. That's VOP [violation of probation] for both [of] us if they find out.

Maintaining relationships is a significant source of strain for girls (Garcia and Lane 2012). Research with girls in the JSS found that sources of strain were identified in girls' "familial," "love," and "frenemy" relationships (Garcia and Lane 2012). Above, Breea explained that by providing emotional support and participating in routine digital nurturing activities that combatted her own strain, she had violated her probation when she tried to contact her friend on social media.

What if Someone is Shot?

With 86% of girls in this study reporting that they had witnessed community violence in the form of a shooting, it is perhaps not surprising that girls felt the phone was necessary in case these incidents occurred across their network. Emma explained: "Say because we're in the city that somebody pulls out a gun and shoots. What if it hits Miss Loretta, and none of us knows her [phone] password to get into the phone to call 911? I feel like we should always be allowed a phone." Loretta, the youth worker, would be the only person present with a phone at after-school sessions because the girls had their phones removed. This was a real and practical concern registered by Emma and shared by others in the focus group. What could girls do in this type of emergency with no way to call for help?

Girls are thought to be more affected by events that may occur on or offline within their broader network (Garcia and Lane 2012). The loss of friends, family members, or partners played a significant role in the girls' stress. O'Really's explanation of why she needed to keep her phone on loud through the night related to both the multiple losses within her network and the important role that she had within her network:

Like, where we live, say, like somebody gets shot or something. Middle of the nighttime. And it's the summertime, you feel me; somebody might be calling your phone. Like, you know, people stay out all night. And so, someone gets shot ... like your cousin or someone get[s] shot and, like, the people that was around know you. So, they gonna call you first, not your mom. They [are] calling you to tell you, like, "yo, your cousin just got shot. He [is] on his way to [the] hospital right now." So, I go tell my mom like, du dur just got shot. We [are] on our way to [the] hospital. You feel me?

O'Really raised a crucial point about young people's networks and the workings of girls' exo- and meso-systems. Risks are present and remain constant across the ecological environment, exposing girls, their friends, and families to community violence. Like girls living in similar environments, O'Really had a central communicative role (Lane 2018) facilitated by the digital ecology, which allowed girls to keep track of their networks remotely while also allowing others immediate access to them. As O'Really illustrated, an event occurring in the meso- or exo-system, like a shooting, can be transferred to their micro-system at great speed. Reflective of girls from similar environments (Lane 2018) being digitally available 24/7, the girls felt they were fulfilling a responsibility to be alert to the risks that others in their life faced.

Distraction and Coping

All the girls talked about using their phones for distraction when they were stressed or upset. The majority of girls talked about using their phones and apps to distract them and help them deal with micro-systems of trauma and domestic abuse:

My mom argues with her boyfriends; they scream and shout and sometimes more. I try not to get involved anymore. I put my headphones on and listen to music. I have even made some playlists to help block it all out and help me sleep after. (Maddison).

Success concurred with this when talking about arguments at home between her dad and brother, stating that

Sometimes it is good to be able to block them all out. I don't want to hear them shouting all the time or smashing stuff, you know. It's scary when they argue, makes me shake sometimes, but watching videos on YouTube helps.

Emma also talked about using her phone to channel creativity in writing fan fiction after events at home: I have been writing fan fiction for a while now. It started when things got really bad at home. I had been in and out of the house a lot. Every time I came back, there would be more drama, so I started creating this different world on Tumblr, and people liked it, so I kept writing it; [it] ended up that the more time I spent on it, the less time I had to spend with my stepdad. Like I'm here, but I'm not here, you know. [It] seems like it's better for everyone.

The escapism Emma was achieving through creative expression and positive affirmations reflect how phones are becoming a more integral part of young people's self-care (Wilson 2016), clearly evidencing the phone as a positive mediator of personal stress.

O'Really explained that she also used her phone for self-care when blocking out sounds of the city:

It's noisy here at night, you know, especially at night in the summer. Then you have to turn up the volume on the videos ... you hear sirens, cops and ambulances, people shouting, arguing, people raving too, racing ATVs (all-terrain vehicle), and, of course, there are gunshots, of course. I fall asleep a lot with my headphones in, listening to music or watching videos. How else am I supposed to sleep? (O'Really)

It seems that the phone plays an important part in helping girls manage their emotions. While this is not a long-term solution, it is important to consider the immediate relief and support girls receive from their digital ecology, which helps to further contextualize the effects of digital bans.

Digital Lockdown Responses

As described above, girls consistently rely on complex digital ecologies. It is perhaps unsurprising that none of the girls complied with court-ordered digital access bans, and all girls sought opportunities to reconnect digitally. Respondents felt a sense of injustice from the imposed bans, which were tantamount to digital lockdowns, curtailing girls' social interactions, emotional support, and abilities to feel safer on the street. Girls' perceptions of injustice can lead to strain and result in deviancy (Broidy and Agnew 1997). Both a sense of injustice and how digital lockdowns can be circumvented were captured by Success:

It's crazy. So, like, if it's a phone right in front of me and I can use it, I'm gonna use it. It's not like, "oh, just cause the judge say[s] I cannot be on social media, I'm not going to be on social media." The judge ain't in my face right now. That's how I'm coming. Like, I'm gonna change my Facebook name, so, therefore, they can't look me up; make my page private. I'm Gucci. Like, I'm still being on social media, but the judge ain't gonna know unless my dad or somebody say[s] something.

When digital access is removed by the court, girls' digital profiles remain. Girls need to maintain social media profiles for a number of reasons: first, to ensure security in their networks as explained above; second, to maintain friendships because even unintended neglect of digital communication can weaken and break social ties (Boase and Kobayashi 2008); and third, to manage threats that may occur online. This final safety risk that girls face without a phone or internet access is linked to the need to manage extreme levels of "frenemy strain"—that is, arguments or disagreements that are occurring on social media (Garcia and Lane 2012).

Almost all participants in the study had been involved in a filmed fight. The lead-up to a fight was often played out publicly over social media. Rosa explained: "You need to know who is coming for you." Being unaware of an impending attack because you are out of the digital loop is not only physically dangerous but, as observed in similar research, a lack of a digital response can also be identified as an act of disrespect, warranting additional attackers from associated gangs (Lim et al. 2013a). Rosa was so afraid of gang-based retaliation that she broke her conditions of house arrest, which included digital lockdown, to go to a library where she accessed computers to check her social media accounts: "It's not just me, is it? There are other people in the house that could get hurt, so I need to know if I need to run." Rosa was arrested at the library for violation of probation and detained for a number of months following this incident.

O'Really also spoke of similar safety concerns: "If someone is coming to my house to rob us or shoot it up again, I need to know when to run or fight, you feel me, because of who my family is. People are always chatting about it online; it's not an option to not see it coming." O'Really was a young person who was never without a phone and often had more than one, even when in digital lockdown. When O'Really was first interviewed, she had recently been in the hospital and was nursing a broken hand due to fighting off a man who had attempted to steal her phone. During the fight, she was "pistol-whipped," which knocked her unconscious.

Due to court-imposed digital bans, a few girls described going to illegal economies to buy a phone and being drawn into selling drugs or being commercially sexually exploited. As Success explained:

Everyone knows where to go to get a phone; you buy off a bum for like \$25. But, when I went, I was buying it, and this guy in a car was like, "I can get you a better phone than that." I went over, and he offered me a place to stay too, so I went. I was trying to get away to, like, a friend, but I needed a phone ... it ended up being three months. I had to do sexual stuff for the phone

... but I guess it really wasn't for the phone. He took that away quick[ly]; it was never really mine.

In a later interview, Success described how she was arrested when a car she was traveling in was stopped. There was a warrant for her arrest, and she was put in detention for running away. This may seem like an extreme example, but other girls had similar experiences that started with buying a phone from a “bum” in an area in the city known for its open-air drug markets and illegal sex trades. This act seemed to signal to others who were present (perhaps deliberately watching and waiting) that the girl was vulnerable and had an immediate need for a phone. Finding a need that they can quickly exploit is common practice for older males targeting girls (Anderson, England and Davidson 2017). The loitering exploiters could then attempt to coerce girls into selling drugs or sexually exploitative activities in exchange for the promised phone. While these may be extreme and unintended consequences of the courts' phone removal policy, they are arguably preventable if the courts were to invest more time into understanding the digital ecology of girls.

Discussion

Drawing upon the words of 42 girls involved with the JJS in a Northeastern US city, this study found that court-imposed digital access bans ruptured girls' digital ecologies, increasing their levels of stress and strain. The digital ecology acts as positive stimuli (Agnew 1992) and is an integral component of girls' social interactions and emotional experiences. Reflective of pathways research by feminist criminologists that have demonstrated that, for girls, abuse or neglect often led to the JJS (for a review, see DeHart and Lynch 2021), restoring the digital ecology for girls is a priority because phones offer them a significant lifeline, helping them to feel safe, mediate risks and cope with traumatic experiences at home and on the street. The findings from this study have demonstrated that girls will take risks and take part in “crimes” to regain access to their digital ecology. For girls of color living in areas of social deprivation, these bans have added to their experiences of marginalization. These results support the existing research and suggest that smartphones provide a sense of connectedness that helps overcome isolation and marginalization (Chayko 2014). Digital access can be transformative and empowering for girls, broadening their access to information and the social world (Porter et al. 2020); removal can serve to further disenfranchise these vulnerable girls.

Phones store girls' histories and tether them to their friends, families, and broader communities. Like young people in and outside the JJS, being disconnected from their digital ecology risks weakening the important support system that phones facilitate (Barn and Tan 2012; Boase and Kobayashi 2008; Lim et al. 2013a, 2013b). This study demonstrates that text-based communication is incredibly meaningful between supportive friends and helps build self-esteem through enhanced self-expression and positive relationships (Boase and Kobayashi 2008; Gonzales 2014; Wilson 2016; Zilka 2020). Being able to contact a variety of people in their social networks immediately via their phones plays a significant role in girls' emotional support and intimacy (Boase and Kobayashi 2008).

The JJS conceptualization of phones by practitioners in this study reflects a “mobile panic” (Goggin 2006) that equates phone use by girls with risks. Reinforced by gendered thinking, phones are connected to moral panics about the sexualization of girls in digital spaces related to pornography, sexting (Gong and Hoffman 2012; Hasinoff 2015), and risks of sexual victimization from a proliferation of sex offenders online (boyd 2014). Girls' phones are removed to protect them and as an effort to control their sexuality by a policy predominantly reserved for adult sex offenders (Hutt 2019; Renberg and Sbrano 2021). Girls are placed in digital lockdowns while boys are not, continuing the paternalistic and patriarchal overreach of the JJS (Chesney-Lind 1989; Lopez 2017). This represents a sexual double standard that suggests boys are able to have phones because they are able to manage sexual risks. It is also acceptable for boys to be part of digital sexual practices like sexting.

Removing girls' phones and not boys' disregards the context of phones within girls' lives and, therefore, minimizes the importance of girls' digital ecology. Focusing on the digital device rather than the social structures that it sits within is common practice within mobile panics (Goggin 2006). In this case, the JJS identifying the phone as an inessential object for girls arguably affects girls' abilities to participate in public life, adding to the material deprivation and social, racial, and gendered oppressions girls face and causing elevated strain across their social ecology. This study provides the JJS, practitioners, and researchers with an opportunity to understand girls' phone use outside the mobile panic discourse.

The courts' integration of digital bans for girls comes at a time when strides are being made to incorporate digital interventions within male prison populations. Limited access to the internet by those in prison has been acknowledged as reproducing social inequality and exclusion, both of which increase risks of recidivism (Jewkes and Reisdorf 2016; Reisdorf and Rikard 2018; Toreld, Haugli and Svalastog 2018). To combat this, those in prison are provided with training workshops on how to incorporate digital technologies for job searches, daily organization of appointments, and staying connected with supportive people. Some men leaving prisons are given a phone on their release (Reisford and Rikard 2018). A recent United Kingdom study of the integration of an app within youth offending services has proved effective for improving relationships between caseworkers and youths, empowering youths through access to personalized information, and helping them comply with court conditions through online schedules and appointments (Barn and Barn 2019). The incorporation of digital technology has a crucial role in young people's rehabilitation. Removing phones from girls is counter to these more progressive practices. Court administrators and practitioners need to take note of digital advances being made in adjacent sectors and find a way to utilize phones and internet access for the benefit of girls.

The JJS needs to accept and adapt to a world that is now digitally mediated. Rather than removing digital access, courts could include critical digital literacy (Lim et al. 2013a). Young people involved with the JJS would benefit from strategies that support them to move away from negative peer influences online, broadening positive connections as an act of resistance to recidivism (Lim et al. 2013a). Developing programs that can work with the digital ecology could become a powerful support mechanism for girls that promotes agency rather than stripping it away. However, as Porter et al. (2020: 191) stated, programs need to be situated "within a much broader endeavor to nurture gender equality." Digital bans are as much about how girls' digital lives are conceptualized on the macro level by patriarchal social institutions as they are about the girls' digital activities in the micro-system.

The COVID-19 pandemic limited this study because it was not possible to visit the girls in person and, due to access bans, it would have been a violation of their probation to contact them digitally. Repeat interviews with the girls proved very helpful in building relationships and tracking changes in digital practices and policies over time. Being able to conduct repeat interviews with all of the girls would have been beneficial.

This qualitative study has demonstrated that phones facilitate and shape the digital ecology of girls, acting as positive stimuli. Digital access makes girls feel safer and tempers the effects of trauma within their homes and communities. Digital ecologies are gendered, and punitive court responses have disproportionate criminalizing effects on girls of color from resource-deprived neighborhoods, causing significant ecological ruptures. The digital dislocation of girls when phones are removed is abrupt and felt across the social ecology by friends and families who are reassured by the constant contact with young people enabled by digital devices (Boase and Kobayashi 2008). The courts' rupturing of the digital ecology with digital access bans affects girls negatively, increasing the stress and strain that leads girls into further involvement in crime and the justice system. The current phone removal policy expects girls to live in a social ecology that simply no longer exists. Digital bans are not evidence-based, and they do not identify or intervene in preventing girls' pathways to the justice system. A rethinking of the role of phones and internet access is needed to ensure that JJS practices of paternalism and punitive interventions are not channeled or enhanced through new digital means.

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