SUMMARY

For a long time, researchers generally neglected criminal behaviour of girls, most probably because committing crimes was seen as a male phenomenon with males outnumbering females in official statistics. As the number of arrested and adjudicated girls is rising, there is an increasing need for knowledge how to effectively cope with these delinquent females. After all, only when interventions target adequate criminogenic needs (i.e. important risk factors) will they be successful in reducing recidivism.

The first aim of the current dissertation is therefore to examine which factors are related to delinquency of girls and which of these are similar to those for boys. Furthermore, since the sex difference in the prevalence of delinquency is so prominent, but so little understood, a second aim of this dissertation is to search for explanations why girls are less involved in criminal behaviour than boys.

To demonstrate the extent of the sex difference in delinquency, both official records as well as self-reported data are described. Less girls than boys appear to commit offences, regardless of the method of measuring delinquency and regardless of the type of delinquency. Nevertheless, the largest sex differences can be found in official records. This may imply that boys and girls are treated differently by the police and the justice system but also that boys and girls fill in questionnaires differently. According to both self-reported data as well as official records girl offending peaks at the age of 15. The peak age for boys is 16 according to self-reported data and 19 according to official data. Based on results from the self-reported data as well as from the official records, it can be concluded that the increase of girl delinquency was relatively larger than the increase of boy delinquency in the period between 1996 and 2005.

Regarding the first aim of this dissertation, boys and girls appear to have many risk factors for adolescent delinquency in common, especially concerning personality, specific parenting characteristics (such as parental monitoring, harsh discipline, number of rules at home, negative interaction, parental solicitation and involvement of parents in school) and peers. However, some factors are uniquely associated with either boys’ or girls’ delinquent behaviour. Regarding the individual domain, unique factors for boys are mainly birth problems, whereas for girls unique risk factors refer to mental health problems. In the family domain, unique factors – for both boys and girls – are found with regard to maternal factors in particular though not with regard to paternal factors. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that unique factors for girls often reflect the severity of risks, such as the number of life events, the extent of friends’ delinquency and the extent of best friend’s delinquency in specific.

Regarding the second aim of this dissertation, three possible explanations are examined for the sex difference in delinquency: the
exposure hypothesis, the vulnerability hypothesis and the threshold hypothesis. The exposure hypothesis – which states that girls have lower levels of risk factors and higher levels of promotive factors than boys and are therefore less likely to be delinquent – is to a large extent confirmed in this dissertation. Girls report higher levels than boys of adolescent disclosure towards mothers and of parental solicitation from mothers. These are both factors that had an inhibiting effect on delinquency. On the other hand, boys are exposed to more delinquent friends than girls, while having many delinquent friends is a risk factor for juveniles to be delinquent themselves. It is demonstrated that sex was not a predictor of delinquency anymore when differences in exposure regarding these three factors are taken into account.

Differential exposure to adolescent disclosure towards mother, regarding parental solicitation of mother and regarding peer delinquency together therefore appear to be related to – and may even explain – the higher prevalence of delinquency among boys than among girls.

The vulnerability hypothesis is not confirmed in this dissertation. According to this hypothesis, boys and girls have different associations between risk factors and delinquency (i.e. they are differentially vulnerable to risk factors) and these differences are associated with the sex difference in delinquency. More specifically, girls are supposed to be less vulnerable for risk factors and more ‘vulnerable’ for promotive factors than boys and therefore less likely to be delinquent. Although girls and boys are found to be differentially vulnerable for some factors, these differences are not always in the direction expected by the hypothesis. As expected, support from mothers appears to have a stronger promotive effect on girls than on boys. Nevertheless, maternal control has a promotive effect on boys but a risk effect on girls. Also, the level of delinquency of best friends is positively related to girls’ delinquency whereas no relation is found with boys’ delinquency. Besides, girls’ delinquency appears to be related to more risk factors in general than boys’ delinquency. However, in line with the vulnerability hypothesis, girls have more promotive factors than boys.

Differential exposure and vulnerability appears to operate concurrently, at least regarding maternal parenting factors. This combination of differential exposure and vulnerability for maternal parenting factors does however not appear to explain why girls less often commit offences than boys.

The threshold hypothesis – claiming that girls compared to boys become delinquent only after they are exposed to a higher number of risks – is also not confirmed in this dissertation. No differences in risk levels exist between delinquent boys and girls. Also the study regarding the location of the threshold does not show that the threshold for girls is higher than for boys. This is found for delinquency in late childhood (ages 10-12) as well as in adolescence (ages 13-16). However, it is also shown that the relationship between the probability to be delinquent and the level of risk is quadratic for
girls – indicating that the probability of delinquency amplifies when girls have higher levels of risk – whereas for boys the probability has a linear relationship with the risk level. Because of this amplification, delinquent girls on average have more risk factors than boys once they are delinquent.

All in all, this dissertation has shown that the relationship with mothers and the number of delinquent friends come across as important ingredients of the sex difference in the prevalence of delinquency. In addition, maternal factors and mental health problems appear to be uniquely related to delinquency of girls. Moreover, no sex differences in thresholds for delinquency appear to exist.