

See the Change

How Northeast Florida is Stemming the Tide of Girls Entering the Juvenile Justice System

In recent years, Northeast Florida has experienced a dramatic drop in the number of girls involved in the juvenile justice system: significantly fewer girls are being arrested, put on probation, committed to juvenile justice institutions or transferred to adult court.

The most recent data trends analysis from the Delores Barr Weaver Policy Center shows significant change in the system's response to girls in Northeast Florida. Between 2011 and 2015, arrests of girls in the 4th Judicial Circuit (Duval, Clay and Nassau Counties) dropped 22% and the number of girls committed to residential placements fell 51% (higher than statewide and national averages).

In Duval County alone — the largest county in the circuit and the home of the Policy Center — arrests of girls were down 25% and the number of girls committed to residential placements declined 67%.

Northeast Florida's changes are the result of a comprehensive, community-wide focus to find better ways to meet the needs of girls who are in trouble with authorities or on a path to trouble. Led by the Policy Center, advocates in Northeast Florida are working with schools, police, prosecutors, public defenders, the Department of Juvenile Justice and the courts to find more constructive pathways for girls.

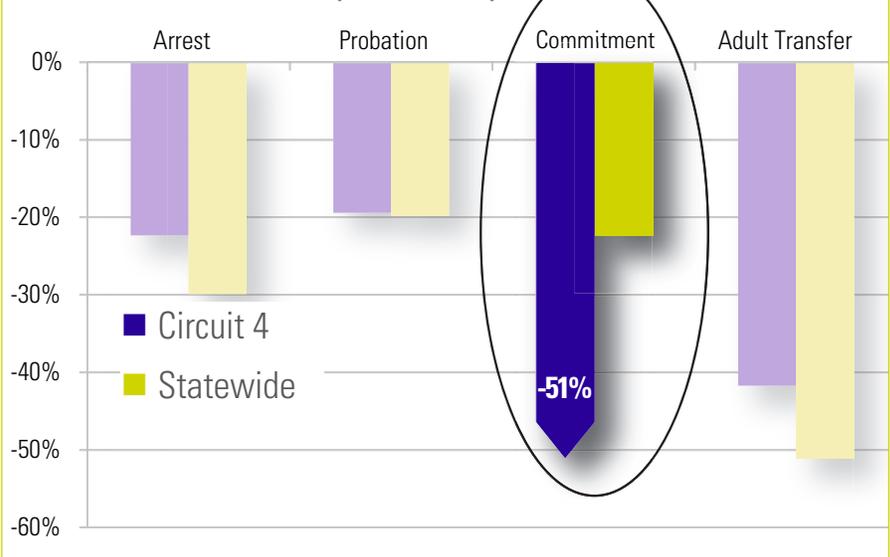
This is about more than statistics. Keeping girls out of the juvenile justice system saves money and improves lives by providing services designed to address histories of grief and loss, sexual violence and trauma. These changes are about seeing the girl, seeing her potential and helping her realize it.

A Laser Focus on Girls

For more than 15 years, advocates have worked to make Florida's juvenile justice system more responsive to the specific needs of girls.

Research shows that girls' pathways into the juvenile justice system are very different from boys'. Girls are

Girls' Reduced Juvenile Justice Involvement Over a 3-Year Period (2011-2014)



far more likely to have been the victim of physical and/or sexual abuse and have higher rates of attempted suicide and self-mutilation than boys. And girls' pathways into the juvenile justice system begin early — in elementary and middle school.

Historically, girls in Florida were disproportionately arrested, placed in detention and in secure residential facilities for less serious offenses than boys, rather than benefiting from intervention and diversion programs.

Since 2000, advocates have helped the State of Florida adopt more girl-centered programming and focus

more on prevention and intervention than incarceration of girls. The 4th Judicial Circuit has been at the forefront of both sides of this issue.

On the one hand, it has been known as a place that is tough on crime for girls: in 2011-12 the circuit committed more girls to juvenile residential facilities than any other circuit in Florida — approximately five times more than Circuit 11-Miami-Dade, three times more than Circuit 13-Tampa and almost one-third more than Circuit 9-Orlando.

On the other hand, the region has been home to some of the most progressive and aggressive efforts to change circumstances for girls, to change their pathways into the system and to change the system's response to them.

While declines in the arrests and commitments of girls track broader trends seen across the State of Florida, it is clear that — particularly in terms of the number of girls committed to residential facilities — dramatic change is happening in Northeast Florida.

“When a community supports a laser-like focus on girls, we can see these results,” said Lawanda Ravoira, president and CEO of the Policy Center.

Changing the Game in Northeast Florida

Ravoira and her team at the Policy Center have employed a multi-faceted strategy in Northeast Florida that includes:

- Building a strong and influential cadre of allies;
- Creating “interruption” at every point along the continuum for girls in the system;
- Providing information, options and alternatives to educators, police, probation officers, prosecutors and judges — those decision-makers that girls encounter;
- And listening, listening, listening — to the data, to the girls, to their families and to the citizen leaders.

That final point really should be the first, Ravoira said, because everything her team does is grounded in data. When they began the intensive local work, they first looked at data — who got arrested and for what, who was sent to detention and who went into a diversion program, who got committed to a residential program, who got placed on probation, who recidivates.

“We look at trends and patterns by gender, race and ethnicity and at community indicators of the health and well-being of girls,” said Vanessa Patino Lydia, who has authored most of the research and interviewed hundreds of girls and their families through the years. “We monitor and analyze the data so that we know the status of girls and the areas that warrant the community’s attention.”

It was the data that captured the interest of a group of “citizen leaders,” as Ravoira calls them, in 2007. The Women’s Giving Alliance in Duval County provided funding to develop a national model to address the needs of girls in the juvenile justice system. Part of the strategy, developed with the help of The Children’s Campaign (see box), was to build a cohort of influential allies.

The Children’s Campaign - A Key Partner

The Children’s Campaign, a Tallahassee-based advocacy organization, has been a key player in changing the landscape for girls in Northeast Florida.

Active in promoting effective public policy around girls’ issues since the 1990s, The Children’s Campaign provided the technical expertise that enabled the Women’s Giving Alliance to implement its Justice for Girls: Duval County Initiative with Dr. Lawanda Ravoira in 2007.

The Children’s Campaign brings political science to the social science of the Policy Center. The Children’s Campaign is adept at building constituencies with the interest and ability to influence policy, identifying and pursuing advocacy opportunities, and, when appropriate, championing legislative changes.

Through this integration of political and social science, the Delores Barr Weaver Policy Center has been highly effective at advancing its agenda to improve circumstances for girls in Duval County. Equally important, The Children’s Campaign has raised the awareness and abilities of scores of individuals in Duval County to take action and influence change in matters of importance to them.

The Justice for Girls: Duval County Initiative Leadership Council is a long name for a group of about a dozen individuals whom Ravoira asked to help provide solutions to the complex issues that were resulting in the high incarceration rates of girls on the Northeast Florida.

“These were people who were skilled at solving complex problems,” Ravoira said. “We didn’t ask them for money or support. We asked them to help us think about how we could do our work differently because what was being done was not effective.”

What they did shifted the work.

Through research, Ravoira and her colleagues discovered that risk factors for future involvement with the justice system include school failure as early as elementary or middle school.

When the Leadership Council reviewed the data they noticed one statistic that they found shocking: in one year, Duval County Public Schools had *suspended 811 girls in elementary school*. If early school failure was an indicator of future system involvement, then Duval County had a big problem.

“They saw the pipeline, the 811 girls who were on the path to residential [commitment],” Ravoira said. “They said ‘downstream matters.’ As long as we focus only on the girls already in residential programs, we will always be here.”

Beginning “Interruptions”

With support and guidance from the Leadership Council, the Policy Center team launched its first “interruptive” program — Girl Matters®: It’s Elementary. The program, initially in two elementary schools, operated inside the school. Policy Center staff provided supports and training for teachers and interventions for girls who otherwise would have been suspended for in-school behavior problems. The goals were to help girls improve school success, interrupt suspensions and prevent the spiraling effect of girls entering the juvenile justice system.

“It gave the principal a place to send a girl who was acting out in the classroom rather than suspending her,” Ravoira said. “The staff on site would identify what was contributing to the behaviors and develop an individualized care plan.”

The team went on to create programs that created

“interruption” at multiple points along the pathway.

After months of work with the State Attorney’s Office, staff from the Policy Center now provide classes to help girls who have been diverted and their families gain a better understanding of the juvenile justice system, be aware of available resources and improve communication between girls and their guardians.

In the Duval County Detention Center, the Policy Center team facilitates girl-centered groups called SAVVY Sister, which provide girls a safe place to learn new skills to navigate their surroundings.

In the courtroom, Policy Center staff works with the probation officer and judge to develop a care plan for the girl. That care plan might include therapy, a work plan, an education plan or other activities. “We now have judges who call us from the courtroom seeking our help,” Ravoira said.

Finally, for those girls who do end up in residential placements, Policy Center staff provides telemental health services. Staff visits with them in lockup and accompanies them to court as needed. (It is worth noting that of the 10 residential facilities for females in Florida, none is located in Northeast Florida).

Earning Credibility in the System

This “interruptive” approach requires that Policy Center staff be present and involved at each juncture. That high level of engagement has helped the Policy Center earn credibility within the community of authorities who interact with girls.

“We are present — in elementary schools, in detention, in court, in residential facilities,” said Ravoira. “And we have a consistent message that includes core values around girls in the juvenile justice system.

“We have earned our credibility inside the courtroom. It’s real-time intervention. We are available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. It’s not ‘We’ll call you when we open on Monday.’”

And many people within the system have welcomed their involvement, in part because they offer new options, particularly for some of the most challenging situations.

“We are not just calling attention to what needs to change,” Ravoira said. “We provide alternatives. The

alternative to incarceration, the judges respond in a very positive way.”

Just as Girl Matters®: It's Elementary provides an alternative to suspension for school principals, Girl Matters®: Continuity of Care provides alternatives for officials at other points along the pathway.

“We have had to earn our credibility in an adversarial system,” Ravoira said. “A judge rules in our favor with some level of risk. It's easier for the judge if the girl is locked up somewhere, because the judge knows she won't be doing anything illegal.”

Earning Credibility for the Girls

The work of the Delores Barr Weaver Policy Center has resulted in a more subtle but equally important change in the landscape for girls in Duval County.

Having members of the Leadership Council — a group of influential citizen leaders — pay attention to this population has built enormous credibility for the girls.

“By their interest, these leaders were saying that these girls are worthy of attention, worth sitting in court with, worth writing letters for,” Ravoira said. “It was not just us [advocates] who were sitting there. Everybody expects us to be there. It's the citizen leaders. They are standing behind a population of girls that is often labeled, judged or simply made invisible.”

This has not gone unnoticed in the courtrooms and in the Legislature. Members of the Leadership Council are just as quick to speak up on policy issues as they are to sit in court providing moral support for a girl's case.

“They are the ones I can call on a Sunday and say, ‘please call this legislator’ or ‘please write this letter,’” said Tayloe McDonald who handles public affairs for the Policy Center. “They will do it right then.”

Lessons for Other Communities

While Florida also has made significant progress in addressing the needs of girls in the juvenile justice system, the Northeast Florida experience is unique, Ravoira said. “It demonstrates the bigger leaps that can be made with an intense local focus and community engagement.”

Based on that experience, Ravoira and her team offer the following advice to other communities interested in undertaking this work.

- Know your own data. Know what girls in your community are facing. Ground everything in data.
- Know how to partner with girls and their families. Hear their stories. Learn from them.
- Know how to inspire and inform citizen leaders. Ground them in the data and the experiences of girls. Let them work on your behalf.
- Understand that this is long-term work and staying the course is key.
- Be comfortable with controversy. You must be willing to challenge entrenched practices that will make people unhappy and you unpopular.
- Know that the work is worth the effort.

In Northeast Florida, the Delores Barr Weaver Policy Center included a renewed Call to Action in its most recent research report, telling the community:

“We have achieved some important progress over the past three years. We cannot, however, become complacent.

“We have a growing population of girls on probation in some communities...There are still girls being committed for technical violations of probation. And on the front end, civil citations are still woefully underutilized.”

In sum, the work must continue: research, interruptions and advocacy.



We engage communities, organizations and individuals through quality research, community organizing, advocacy, training and model programming to advance the rights of girls and young women, especially those in the justice system.