

Executive Summary

Breaking New Ground on the First Coast: Examining Girls' Pathways into the Juvenile Justice System

Vanessa Patino Lydia, MPA and Aubrey Moore, MSW
Delores Barr Weaver Policy Center

October 2015



PBS NewsHour

The goal of this exploratory research was to hear from girls from the First Coast (Duval, Clay, Nassau, Baker, and St. Johns counties) who are in juvenile residential commitment programs in Florida, to better understand their common pathways into the system, their experiences with services, and their recommendations for improving the response to girls. The study is written from the perspective that girls are the experts of their own lives, and the Policy Center is committed to accurately portraying the voices and experiences of girls.

The research study was guided by three questions: (1) What pathways into the system do girls from the First Coast have in common? (2) What services and people were most helpful to girls in the local community before placement, during placement, and what did each girl desire after placement? (3) What are girls' recommendations for improving the court processes, probation, detention, and residential programming?

Girls involved in the justice system offer clear narratives about what girls in this community are facing, what protective factors buffer their own life traumas, and what girls need. Their lived experiences paint a failure of our community and systems to intervene at multiple times throughout girls' lives. A deeper look at each girl's path into the system via official records reveals several commonalities: (1) an early misdemeanor charge, such as battery or petit theft, leading to possible diversion or other alternative to incarceration or probation; and (2) failing

to appear in court or running away, resulting in a pick-up order / contempt of court, and/or technical violation of probation, resulting in commitment to a residential program.

Most girls' offenses do not threaten public safety, yet the girls are being committed in order to receive services to ensure their safety and/or as punishment for their behavior. This practice negatively impacts girls' health outcomes and their future opportunities. Our research suggests that our community punishes girls for being homeless; for "acting out" in anger as a result of being exposed to sexual violence, neglect, or abusive family situations; for using survival behaviors; and for not conforming to traditional gender expectations. As a response, girls are locked up in order to get their basic needs met: education, housing, and mental health services. These system failures and individual practices send a message to girls that because there are no services left or available to help them in the community, we must lock them up.

Findings

Interviews with girls took place at nine of the 10 girls' juvenile residential programs in Florida, between March and November 2014. Thirty-two (32) girls incarcerated from the First Coast community were interviewed: Duval (21), Nassau (3), Clay (7), and St. Johns County (1). There were no girls from Baker County incarcerated at the time of data collection. The girls self-identified themselves

as Black or African American (47%), Caucasian (34%), Mixed/multiple race (12%), Native American (3%), and Hispanic (3%). The average age of girls participating in the study was 16 years old, the youngest was 14, and the oldest was 18 years old. The average length of stay in the residential programs for girls in our sample was eight months.

Findings: Girls Share Common Life Experiences and Pathways into the Juvenile Justice System

Girls Are Entering the Juvenile Justice System at Young Ages and There Are Differences by Race/Ethnicity

First Coast girls are entering the system at young ages, with 44% of girls' first arrest occurring at age 13 or younger. The data also suggests that Black girls are being arrested at earlier ages than White girls: 53% of Black girls and 27% of White girls had their first arrest at age 13 or younger. On average, the girls had 2.7 prior misdemeanors and 1.5 prior felonies on their record; however, girls of color, on average, have fewer felonies



PBS NewsHour Image

than White girls. All girls had previously been in secure detention at least three times, but for the majority of girls (72%), this was their first residential placement.

Violation of Probation Was the Most Serious Offense for Half of the Girls

Half of the girls were in their commitment program for a *non-law violation of probation* as their most serious offense at the time of disposition. During the interviews, 91% of girls self-reported they had violated probation at some point. Outside of committing a new crime/law violation (31%), girls shared the following reasons for violating probation: running away (44%), not attending school (19%), violating curfew (19%), failing a drug test (19%), being suspended from school (6%), and failing to appear in court (6%).

Common Life Experiences Link Girls to Involvement in the Juvenile Justice System

Girls from the First Coast share many life experiences in common. Girls reported experiencing: substance use (91%), suspension or expulsion (88%), running away (78%), living without parents (69%), experiencing the loss of relatives or friends in the last year (53%), being arrested for fighting with someone in the household (50%), pregnancy (34%), foster care involvement (28%), performing a sexual act to the person providing a place to stay, or for food, clothing, or transportation (25%), and 25% of girls considered themselves homeless (25%). These adverse life experiences that often begin within families, contribute to complex traumas. Yet girls are incredibly resilient, sharing relational / social challenges they have overcome, with the majority of girls stating they were most excited about seeing / being with their families and going home.

Girls Experience Adverse Treatment by Community and Systems

Girls recounted their experiences in school, community, the child protection system, and with people involved with the legal system. The majority of girls (60%) had experienced victimization by peers, teachers, and/or school policies. Girls reported being bullied by students, having teachers talk poorly about their families, and teachers/administrators not doing anything when incidents were reported. The majority of girls (68%) said their arresting officer treated them rudely and/or in a hostile manner. More than half of the girls (69%) felt they / their family were not treated fairly in court. However, the majority of the girls felt their probation officer treated them fairly.

Findings: Girls' Perceptions of Services and People Most Helpful in the Local Community

Most Services in the Community Are Less Helpful

Girls reported utilizing medical, school, and mental health services in the community before incarceration. Medical services were rated the most helpful (96%), while on the contrary, drug/alcohol treatment was the least helpful for girls (21%). By comparison, with the exception of medical/health services, the vast majority of girls rated the same services received in the community as less helpful than

when received in residential placement: school services (55% community vs. 81% residential), mental health (48% community vs. 84% residential), and drug/alcohol (21% community vs. 72% residential). However, girls shared that if the following services were available in the community, they would be most likely to utilize opportunities for work/job skills (83%), individual/family therapy (78%), and connecting with women with similar experiences (78%).

Mothers / Mother Figures Play a Key Role in Providing Support Before and After Incarceration

When asked who they turned to for support while in elementary, middle, and high school, girls reported feeling most supported during elementary school, and family members were referred to most often, regardless of grade level. Often it was the mothers, grandmothers, and aunts that supported and encouraged the girls. There were also 14 instances in which girls identified a staff by name from a community program, probation, the detention center, or a residential program who had supported or encouraged them. More than half of the girls identified their mother



/ mother figure as the source of support / who they will seek when they are released from incarceration. Mothers / mother figures were also the most highly rated person whom girls think can make a positive difference in their lives,

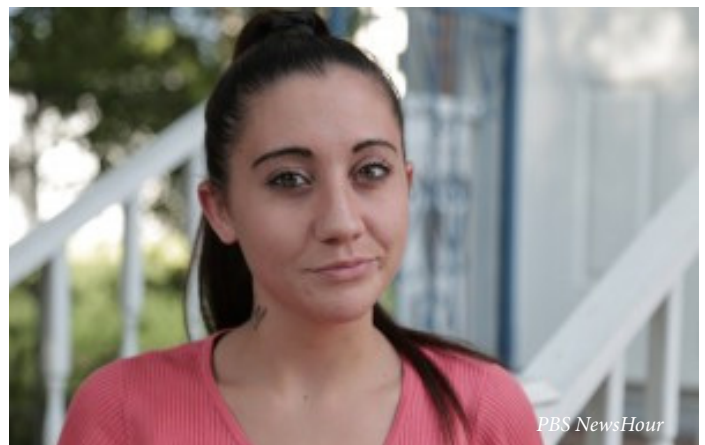
followed by female mentors, fathers, therapists, and program staff.

Findings: Girls' Recommendations for Improving Systems for Girls across the Continuum

Girls' recommendations were centered on relationships and wanting to be heard. They described the unfairness of the system which resulted in their incarceration. Girls recommended more follow-through and oversight from case managers, and recommend giving girls the opportunity to speak in court. Girls want to have consistent and trusting relationships with staff across the continuum, whether in detention, probation, or in residential placement. Generally, girls asked for staff to

respect them. Recommendations also include increasing safety and creating access to mental health and medical services. Additionally, in detention and residential placement, girls' recommendations focused on the physical environment, including cleanliness of the facility, food quantity and quality, and having access to blankets and individual undergarments.

Girls were also asked what they want the world to know that will help girls and young women with similar experiences. Responses emphasized the importance of listening to girls, seeking to understand girls' behaviors within the context of their life experiences, and providing support, and without judgment.



Transforming the response to girls on the First Coast is informed by the strengths of girls. Girls remind us every day through their words and actions that they have hope for their futures, innovative ideas, and messages for younger girls and for our community. The critical gaps in trauma-informed, community-based services to address homelessness, extensive loss, families in crisis, and substance abuse are identified. Shifts needed in education, child protection, law enforcement, as well as alternatives to incarceration, are raised. Strategies needed for partnering with girls are outlined in the full report and include: specialized training for teachers, clinicians, service providers, probation, attorneys, judges, and child welfare professionals. Highlighted in the report are suggestions for the coordination of services, legislative and policy shifts that promote girls' well-being, and targeted approaches for monitoring practices to address girls' disparate involvement in and treatment within the juvenile justice system, are highlighted.



Impacting the Experiences of Disconnection: Through a Girl-Centered Approach

Derived from "Breaking New Ground," the graphic below elevates girls' experiences to highlight questions and opportunities for the community to develop better policies, programs, and practices for girls.

ISSUE	WHAT GIRLS SHARED	WHAT'S NEEDED	QUESTIONS FOR COMMUNITY
<p>100% of girls had experiences of loss/ trauma & 91% believe mother figures can make a positive difference in a girl's life.</p>	<p>The narratives of girls included loss (death of parent / primary caregiver, parental incarceration), abandonment, domestic violence, and living on the streets. Yet, mothers / mother figures were identified as the person that girls see as their source of support and who they will seek when leaving residential lockup.</p>	<p>Community response to support the needs of girls and families facing grief and loss, parent incarceration, trauma and domestic violence, and therapeutic and care management services that include mother figures.</p>	<p>How do we increase our training, collaborations and community resources to reflect an understanding of: 1) the impact of loss on lives of girls, and 2) importance of enhancing the bond between girls and their mother figures?</p>
<p>28% of girls had child involvement and 69% had lived without parents.</p>	<p>Girls reported problems with investigations on allegations of abuse, and not having a safe space visit or someone to call to talk to about their placement.</p>	<p>Alternative policies that provide oversight of youth runaway behaviors, victimization in placements, sexual exploitation, and needs of girls in the child welfare system.</p>	<p>What safeguards are in place to support youth in the child welfare system, preventing involvement in the juvenile justice system?</p>
<p>88% of girls had been mostly for school truancy.</p>	<p>Girls reported having "no one to turn to" while in school, and that the educational services in residential programs were more helpful than in the community. Also, girls had concerns about the stigma of going back to school after being locked up, or not having many options for school.</p>	<p>Appropriate educational placements, alternative policies and practices rather than suspension for truancy, girl-centered dropout prevention, and working with students in transition.</p>	<p>How can we increase school connectedness and school engagement for marginalized girls in our community?</p>
<p>91% of girls reported using substances.</p>	<p>Girls report using substances when they feel stressed, and to block out feelings. Substance abuse services in the community were not helpful, and girls were concerned about relapse when returning to the community.</p>	<p>Relevant trauma-informed treatment that is developmentally appropriate and follows cultural, relational, girl-centered framework.</p>	<p>How can we connect girls with a gender-appropriate therapeutic model that recognizes trauma and addiction, when developing substance abuse intervention plans?</p>
<p>78% of girls had run away, and 25% were exposed to sexual exploitation.</p>	<p>Girls shared that they ran away for various reasons, including substance use, feeling neglected by family, conflict in the home, and to avoid discipline. Girls who had run away also considered themselves homeless at some point.</p>	<p>Community-based options for housing: medical services, therapy, and legal services; and vocational skills training. Also, group homes or safe houses for girls who are victims of sex trafficking.</p>	<p>What service network exists for youth who are homeless and living in high-risk situations?</p>
<p>50% of commitments were for noncriminal offenses (violations of probation).</p>	<p>Girls emphasized the length of probation, the low oversight provided, the inconsistency in the fairness and severity of probation compared to their offense. Girls shared the reasons they violated probation: running away, breaking curfew, and not attending school.</p>	<p>Community-based alternatives to detention, and residential placement for girls with high needs (including specialized mental health).</p>	<p>How often are we using detention and commitment because we cannot meet the mental health and trauma needs of girls in our community? Or because there is no other safe place for girls to go? Aside from the financial cost, how much will incarceration impact the well-being of girls across the life-span?</p>