



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

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### About the Policy Center

*The Delores Barr Weaver Policy Center engages 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 juvenile justice system.*

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## Executive Summary

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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 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.



## Introduction

Established in 2013, the Delores Barr Weaver Policy Center is the outgrowth of a girls' reform movement that began in Florida over 15 years ago. Our **mission** is to 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 and child protection systems. Our **priorities** are to shift the way our community responds to girls, and we do this by first listening to girls.

We take a different approach to the work we do, by joining and partnering *with girls where they are—physically and emotionally—in order* to co-create programs and interventions that are rooted in *their* lived experiences and meet *their* specific needs. We recognize that the emotional well-being of a girl begins when she feels safe in her relationships, in the physical space she inhabits, and when her voice is both heard *and* valued. She is the expert of her life and needs. It is for this reason that girls are included in every part of our work, from research to program creation, implementation, evaluation, and leadership.

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, in order to better understand the common pathways into the system, their lived experiences, service provision, and their recommendations for improving the response to girls. Pausing to understand the lived experiences of girls who have been sent away from the community had not been done, and it is a critical step to igniting meaningful dialogue at the local, state, and federal policy and service delivery levels.

## The Data

Although the numbers of arrests and commitments have decreased over the last decade, Jacksonville, Florida (Duval County), has consistently incarcerated the highest number of girls (more than Miami and Tampa combined). In 2013-14, Duval County tied for the highest with Escambia County. Table 1 shows the commitment trends for girls over a five-year period. The Policy Center's Wake-Up Call report (2013) brought attention to the higher rates of arrest and incarceration of girls than boys, for non-felonies, specifically as related to misdemeanor assault and battery, and for commitments for violations of probation (Patino Lydia & Baker, 2013). Additionally, we reported that the well-being of girls in our community was at risk. Specifically, girls entering the juvenile justice system from the First Coast had higher involvement with the child welfare system, with 32% experiencing out-of-home placement (compared to 19% of boys). Based on our analyses of the FL DJJ Positive Achievement Change Tool Assessment (PACT) data specific to the First Coast region, there were greater reports of physical and sexual abuse, mental health needs, self-mutilation, suicidal ideation and attempts, and family risk factors

**Table 1:** Number of Girls Committed to Residential Placement, by County in First Coast, 2009-2014

County	09-10	10-11	11-12	12-13	13-14
Clay	8	14	9	12	8
Duval	65	53	43	44	37
Nassau	7	3	1	1	5
Baker	0	3	1	2	1
St. Johns	9	1	0	6	3
Florida	820	653	443	409	374

Source: DJJ Delinquency Data Retrieve 4/21/2015

among girls in our community (see Table 2). The numbers highlight the need for treatment, and suggest that a lower percentage of girls is being seen / receiving treatment since the percentage of girls with diagnosed mental health problems is lower in the First Coast than statewide for girls. Taken together, the research informs First Coast efforts to “break new ground and transform the response to girls.” With the voices of girls at the center, the findings help inform a local short- and long-term comprehensive approach to prevention and intervention efforts that expand or create a meaningful response to meet the needs of girls who are “falling through the cracks” in the community.

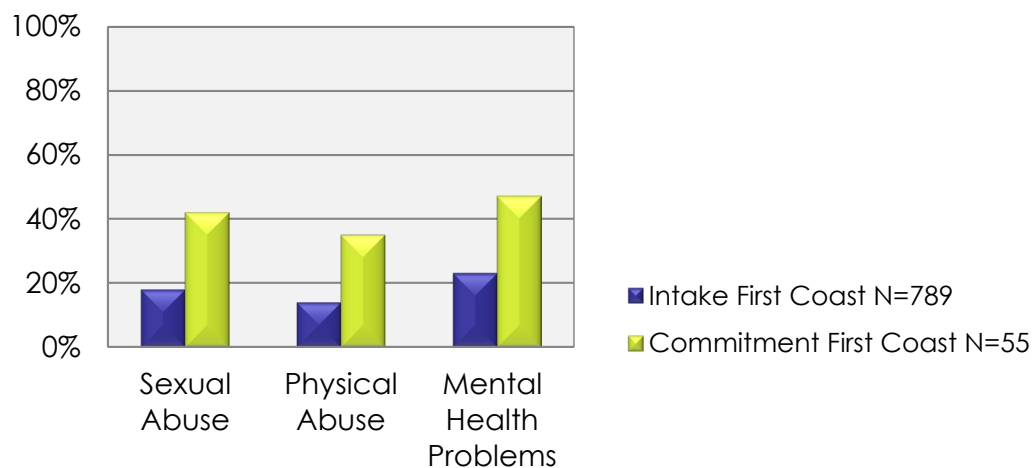
The latest PACT data for 2013–14 shows that girls in the First Coast continue to report experiencing sexual abuse and physical abuse at higher percentages than statewide averages. The profile of needs data can now be disaggregated by point along the juvenile justice system, and indicates that girls who are locked up have higher needs. The data shows that the experiences of abuse impact a greater proportion of girls who are deeper in the system. Specifically, girls committed on the First Coast and statewide report experiencing sexual abuse, physical abuse, and mental health problems more than double, compared to girls entering the system at intake / initial arrest (see Figure 1).

**Table 2:** Statewide and First Coast: Youth Needs by Gender (2011-12)

	State-wide Girls	State-wide Boys	First Coast Girls	First Coast Boys
<b>PACT Assessments (N)</b>	<b>10147</b>	<b>41152</b>	<b>590</b>	<b>2495</b>
Not Enrolled in School	5%	6%	3%	5%
Dependency Petitions*	17%	11%	22%	13%
Parent Prison History	31%	28%	32%	31%
Parent w/ MH/Drug Problem	31%	26%	35%	29%
Placed Out of Home	27%	17%	32%	19%
Suspension History*	81%	86%	73%	81%
Neglect†	14%	10%	12%	8%
Physical Abuse History	26%	15%	29%	5%
Sexual Abuse History	24%	4%	30%	16%
Trauma - Neglect	78%	72%	69%	70%
Witnessed Violence	72%	69%	79%	74%
Diagnosed MH Problem	57%	48%	36%	31%
Self-Mutilation History	8%	2%	9%	2%
Suicide Attempted	14%	5%	15%	5%
Suicide Ideation	29%	13%	31%	14%
Drug Problem	22%	26%	20%	27%
Alcohol Problem	10%	9%	11%	11%

Source: DJJ PACT Data (2011-12) as cited in Wake Up Call, 2013

**Figure 1:** First Coast Girls' Needs Increase with Deeper System Involvement, PACT 2013-14



Source: Author's analysis of DJJ PACT data

## Background Research and Pathways Theories

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Girls involved in the juvenile justice system represent a particularly vulnerable and at-risk sector of the adolescent population. While the numbers of girls being arrested and incarcerated are decreasing locally, statewide, and nationally, girls remain a third of arrests and approximately 15% of commitments nationally. In Florida, the proportion of youth committed who are girls was 15% in 2013 (down from 19% in 2003) (Sickmund, Sladky, Kang & Puzzanchera, 2015). It is also important to consider the rate of commitment per 100,000 girls, which has decreased by 64% in Florida. However, the rate still remains higher in Florida than nationally (46 in Florida compared to 34 nationally in 2011, from 128 in Florida and 60 nationally in 2003) (Sickmund et al., 2015). In many ways, the context of their involvement in the juvenile justice system has been ignored. The mechanisms of the juvenile justice system are designed to be punitive, and can both ignore the trauma that drives behavior and/or exacerbate it. Research shows that the justice system is more punitive for girls since they face higher rates of detainment and commitment for more minor offenses, compared to their male counterparts. The consequence is that girls are pushed through a system not designed to address their life experiences or their needs, which results in damaging outcomes for their health and futures.

### Risk Factors

For girls, risk factors in the family, such as parent's mental illness, substance abuse, parent's incarceration, and domestic violence, play a role in her experiences. Girls' out-of-home placements (for example, foster care, group homes) are often connected to abuse and neglect histories. Many girls involved in the child welfare system also experience school failure, violence, homelessness, financial difficulties, early parenthood, as well as physical and mental health issues (Courtney, Dworsky, Lee & Raap, 2010). Compared to boys, more girls in the juvenile justice system are also in the child welfare system (termed "crossover"). Specifically, one in three girls entering the juvenile justice system from the First Coast had been placed out of home (compared to one in five boys), and 22% of girls had a dependency petition (compared to 13% of boys) (DJJ PACT as cited in Patino Lydia & Baker, 2013). Some research has noted that trauma and family problems are shared risk factors of both systems (Baynes-Dunning & Worthington, 2013), and that lack of communication between the child welfare system, police, probation, and/or juvenile court, contributes to crossover rates for girls (Sherman, 2009).

Lederman, Dakof, Larrea & Li (2004) state that problems and needs related to school achievement are particularly pronounced for at-risk girls. An analysis of 1,000 case files and 86 interviews with girls in the juvenile justice system in Florida (Acoca and NCCD, 2000) found that academic problems emerged as the risk factor most associated with both repeat offending and "serious" offenses. The most statistically significant factor was educational failure, particularly during middle school, where the existence of learning disabilities and suspension histories were cited problems for over 25% of the girls in the sample. In 2012, 69% of girls who came in contact with the juvenile justice system had a suspension history (Florida Department of Juvenile Justice, 2014).

Disengagement resulting from removal from school has been associated with a host of risk factors, including juvenile delinquency. One study found these girls were eight times more likely to be involved in the juvenile justice system than their peers (Clark, Petras, Kellam, Ialongo & Poduska, 2003). In addition, school disengagement increased a girl's risk by 95% for pregnancy and 70% for early parenting (Clark et al., 2003). Morris (2012) noted that for black girls who are disconnected or alienated from school, multiple conditions converge to affect their increased vulnerability into the justice system.



## Theories

There are multiple theories that hypothesize the etiology, or cause, of female juvenile justice system involvement. Feminist theorists assert that gender-neutral theories, which focus on individual-level factors, “blame and pathologize girls instead of recognizing the roles that society and the criminal justice system play in girls’ crimes” (Hubbard & Matthews, 2008, p. 232). More specifically, feminist theories argue that there are considerations specific to girls and women that the justice system and courts have historically ignored, including how relationships, experiences of abuse/victimization, and social location impact girls. The theories that ground our understanding of the unique factors associated with girls’ development, and which may contribute to juvenile justice involvement, are based on the gendered pathways for girls, intersectionality, and Relational-Cultural Theory (RCT). A girl’s life experiences may include adverse events and trauma that impact her health and behaviors. Further, her experiences within systems such as education, child welfare, and juvenile justice impact her connections to the community. These theories are interconnected and highlight how intersectionality plays into both how we do our research and how the findings of this study are interpreted.

### *Gendered Pathways for Girls*

Javdani, Sadeh, and Verona (2011) states that female-relevant theory of crime considers gender not only as an individual attribute, but also as a socio-structural variable. Considering gender as a multilevel construct can provide an important explanatory framework within which the institutional response of the justice system is understood. The institutional response of the justice system to women and girls’ criminal or antisocial behavior constitutes an important “structure” within which gender norms operate and impact criminal trajectories. At the individual level, gender refers to its typical use as a grouping variable, and is considered a characteristic of the person. Thus, differences in criminal trajectories between men and women would largely be interpreted as being caused by factors coming from within the individual (that is to say, women are becoming more violent). However, Javdani et al. (2011) emphasized that at a theoretical level, more care can be taken in the psychological literature to incorporate multilevel conceptualizations of gender, such that women’s antisocial behavior is better understood in the social and institutional contexts in which it emerges and is maintained. Additionally, it is important to understand the intersectionality of gender (for example, race/ethnicity, age) in these contexts.

When girls exhibit “problem behaviors,” and react in ways that are considered non-feminine (aggressiveness), they are punished more harshly than their male counterparts (Espinosa, Sorensen & Lopez, 2013). Researchers have been monitoring the differences in offenses by gender, the reasons for program failure, and the policy changes that may criminalize offenses by young women. As a result of mandatory arrest policies, there have been dramatic increases in the arrests of girls and women for both simple and aggravated assault (Chesney-Lind, 2005). Mandatory arrest policies have contributed to a shift in labeling girls’ arguments with parents from status offenses to assault. In a review of girls who were referred to Maryland’s juvenile justice system for person-to-person offenses, researchers found that nearly all of the girls’ arrests involved assault, and the majority of these incidents were family centered (Mayer, 1994, as cited in Chesney-Lind, 2004). In a study of female juvenile offenders in Florida, Winokur and Blankenship (2002) found that 55% of girls in secure detention were charged with an offense against a family or a household member. Girls were significantly more likely to be placed in secure detention solely for a domestic violence offense than boys in this study. Winokur and Blankenship also found that the majority of youths charged with misdemeanor assault and/or battery were involved in altercations with a family member or a household member. Although girls were more likely to be charged for acts of violence against family or household members than boys, research suggests that girls in these domestic interactions may be victims just as much as they are perpetrators. Society’s response to penalizing behaviors including family conflict and fighting at school is at the core of trends and patterns in girls’ increasing offenses for battery charges (Acoca & NCCD, 2000; Bloom, Owen & Covington, 2005; Lederman, 2000; Sherman, 1999), and thus, policies and practices may

negatively impact girls (Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 1998; Schaffner, 2006).

For example, girls are more likely to be detained for problems at home (battery against family member) and “incorrigibility,” whereas boys are more likely to be arrested for property offenses (Gavazzi, Yarcheck & Chesney-Lind, 2006). A difference between the two gender groups is that the community’s citizens are more likely to be the complainants for boys, whereas parents are more likely to be the complainants for girls. In response, girls are disproportionately charged with status offenses or technical violations which would otherwise not be a crime (for example, running away, truancy, not attending court-ordered group therapy). “Bootstrapping” is the process by which a person is still charged, and continues to come under juvenile justice jurisdiction (for example, contempt proceedings), but the underlying reason is a status offense. This is a serious concern for girls who are committed for contempt of court, violations or probations, status offenses, or violation of court orders (Sherman, 2005). In a study by The Annie E. Casey Foundation (2005), 53% of girls who returned to detention within one year, did so because of a warrant, probation or parole violation, or program failure. Across four states (Oregon, California, New York, and Illinois), the more times girls returned to detention, the gap between girls and boys for these reasons widened (53% for girls versus 41% of boys the first time, compared to 72% for girls and 49% for boys by the third time in one year). A study in Florida found that 70% of girls who committed a status offense were more likely to receive a formal referral if they were referred for contempt proceedings, compared to 46% of boys (Bishop & Frazier, 1991). This circular process of probation violations and using contempt proceedings impacts girls and makes it more likely that they will return to detention or a residential commitment program without having committed a crime (Sherman, 2005). A study by Espinosa et al. (2013) further noted that girls and youth with documented mental health needs are “funneled deeper” into out-of-home placements, and that trauma and bootstrapping experiences continue to indirectly influence outcomes, at both the decision to detain and the decision to commit (p. 1,833).

### *Girls’ Behaviors As a Result to Trauma*

The mechanism by which trauma impacts delinquency is complicated. One study suggested that following the intense, traumatic emotional reactions of fear, rage, confusion, or agitation, the victim begins to shut down emotionally and mentally; this may lead to a child feeling trapped and desperate to thwart danger at any attempt (Ford Chapman, Mack & Pearson, 2006). Ford et al. (2006) continues and asserts that a victimized child might cope with feelings of powerlessness via defense mechanisms such as indifference, defiance, pessimism, distrust, avoidance, resistance, aggression, callousness, or challenging authority. Trauma includes the experience of victimization, witnessing violence, and also the trauma of stigmatization because of poverty, racism, incarceration, or sexual orientation (Covington, 2007).

A study comparing the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE scores) of Florida youth in juvenile justice found that the top three more prevalent ACE indicators were the same for both males and females: family violence, parental separation or divorce, and household member incarceration; however, the largest gap for males and females was sexual abuse (7% and 31%, respectively) (Baglivio et al., 2014). Abuse has significant deleterious biological, mental health, and physical consequences. Justice-involved girls experience high rates of abuse and trauma, which contribute to the complexity of their mental health needs, and this increases the risk of mental health problems. The coping and survival behaviors (running away, substance use, family domestic violence) may contribute to girls’ involvement in the system. The relationship between trauma and the risk for delinquency is “dose dependent,” meaning, the more trauma exposures, the greater the cumulative risk for delinquency (Espinosa et al., 2013). Some researchers suggest that the undertreatment of mental health needs and/or the lack of trauma-informed services for girls in the community contribute to deeper involvement in the system (Patino, Ravoir & Wolf, 2006; Wasserman, McReynolds, Ko, Katz & Carpenter, 2005). For girls with mental health needs, research points to reduced responsivity to system interventions (Teplin, Abram, McClelland, Dulcan & Mericle, 2002).



Girls involved in the juvenile justice system experience sexual abuse at a rate that is four times higher than their male counterparts (Saada Saar, Epstein, Rosenthal & Vafa, 2015). The same study found that justice-involved girls are twice as likely to experience complex trauma as justice-involved males. Sexually abused teens are more likely to experience anatomical brain changes, depressive symptoms, anxiety, posttraumatic stress, decreased interpersonal sensitivity, lower self-esteem, decreased locus of control, more suicidal ideation, and more suicide attempts (Auslander et al., 2002; Berton & Stabb, 1996; Goodkind, Ng & Sarri, 2006; Jonson-Reid & Way, 2001; Kaplan, 1998; Rhodes, Ebert & Meyers, 1993; Sarri & Phillips, 2004; Stiffman, Earls, Robins & Jung, 1988). Women who are sexually abused are more likely than their non-abused peers to: describe their overall health as poor, report more episodes of illness, have higher rates of obesity, experience more chronic pain, have higher incidence of eating disorders, and report more sleep problems (Finestone et al., 2000; Gorey, Richter & Snider, 2001; Kendall-Tackett, 2002). Many girls who experience abuse engage in maladaptive coping strategies as a means to self-soothe; however, when the girls attempt to escape the abuse by living on the streets, some necessarily resort to stealing and survival sex, which leads to further criminalization. For girls, the combination of substance use and traumatic experiences can result in escalating criminality and drug dependence (Armstrong & Costello, 2002; Bardone, Moffit, Caspi & Dickinson, 1996; Mullen, Martin, Anderson, Romas & Herbison, 1996; Smith & Saldana, 2013). There is a positive correlation between greater trauma exposure and more severe substance use (Lipschitz et al., 2003).

Traumatic symptomology can further complicate the experience of incarceration, which by its nature is about maintaining control and often includes isolation. Researchers suggest that retraumatization or worsening of existing unaddressed trauma can occur when youth are placed out of the home and do not feel safe within their surroundings.

### *Intersectionality*

The intersectionality theory asserts that individuals can simultaneously occupy positions of privilege and oppression, depending on the reference group where gender, race, class, and sexuality create overlapping areas of advantage and disadvantage (Choo & Ferree, 2010). This theory notes the importance of girls sharing similar experiences based on gender, but also notes the marked differences within their stories and experiences based on race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and sexual orientation. Women are more likely to live in poverty, and they are also more likely to be mothers and head of the household. In 2011, girls of color continued to be disproportionately incarcerated in residential programs (rate per 100,000): Native American girls (179), African American girls (123), Latinas (47), compared to white girls (37) (Sickmund et al., 2015). When looking at child welfare involvement, African American youth are less likely to be reunited with their families, less likely to find a permanent family, and are more likely to be placed in group homes (McCarthy, The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2011). Youth who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning (LGBTQ) are more likely to face homelessness (Burwick, Oddo, Durso, Friend & Gates, 2014), experience rejection or violence by their caregivers and families (Friedman et al., 2011; Himmelstein & Brückner, 2011), and are more likely to report having experienced sexual abuse as a child, compared to their heterosexual peers (Friedman et al., 2011). Ryan, Huebner, Diaz and Sanchez (2009) found that youth who experienced high family rejection due to their sexual orientation were more likely to report attempted suicide, depression, and substance use. Irvine (2010) found that LGBTQ youth were twice as likely to have foster care involvement, become homeless, run away from home, or be removed from the home by a social worker, compared to their heterosexual counterparts. LGBTQ youth also face harsher punishment at school from administrators (Morgan, Salomon, Plotkin & Cohen, 2014) and are more likely to miss school due to fear. The intersectionality of gender, race, and sexual orientation adds layers that contribute to the lived experiences, system responses, and need for developing individualized interventions.

### *Relational-Cultural Theory*

Relational-Cultural Theory (RCT) emphasizes that growth and development take place through females' relationships and connections with others. RCT provides context to the damage that can occur from disconnections occurring in relationships. These disconnections can take place at a family level and sociocultural level, which could eventually lead to psychological difficulties such as isolation, shame, and silence (Jordan & Hartling, 2002). For girls involved in the system or having difficulty in school, the psychological problems they experience "can be traced back to disconnections or violations within relationships" (Covington, 2007, p. 4).

The importance of relationships for girls and women must be understood within the context of intersectionality of the various roles which women and girls play in their own lives. They are daughters, mothers, sisters, friends, and much more. These roles can be described as identities that can shape and define girls and women as they move through the world. For adolescent girls, their relationships with family and peers relate back to their sense of well-being. The task of adolescent development of girls is to answer "Who am I in relation to others?" When the loss of a family member or friend occurs, the impact of the loss may take many forms, particularly if she was in a caregiver capacity. Larger disconnections often occur as a result to family conflict (domestic violence, abuse, substance abuse, parent incarceration, out-of-home placement). Domestic disputes and grief and loss are some of the ways girls may begin to disconnect from their family. Unaddressed family issues place her at risk for other disconnections. Her schoolwork may become affected due to lack of concentration, truancy, etc. Many times girls become frustrated that they are behind in school or do not feel they are getting the support they need. In turn, school policies may further isolate her and create a deeper disconnect. This type of disconnection can lead to further severed connections in the community. When these are compromised (not feeling they belong, not connected/disassociation), they may not experience the same level of well-being and may engage in behaviors to cope with the violations or loss of relationship. These "behaviors" may jeopardize their health (self-mutilation, suicide ideation/attempts, self-medicating, high-risk sexual activity, alcohol, and drug use/abuse).

The theoretical foundation of this exploratory research is to better understand the lived experiences of girls from our local community. Continued long patterns of dissociation can lead to an increased sense of not belonging, labeling/stigma, shame, and perceptions that "no one cares," she is invisible, not valued, her voice does not matter. These disconnections and her perceptions may push girls farther away from the communities entrusted to care for them. This study gives voice to the stories and circumstances of girls who have become invisible in the community.

# Policy Center's Approach to Research: Methodology

## Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What pathways do the girls from First Coast have in common? Do these pathways vary by race/ethnicity or ZIP code?
2. What services (and people) were most helpful to girls in the local community (before placement), during placement, and desired after placement?
3. What are girls' recommendations for improving the court processes, probation, detention, and residential programming?

*Our research inquiry is girl-centered. This means that our research begins first by listening to girls and interpreting the data through the lived experiences of girls. We provide the opportunity and the safe space for girls to speak their truth. We hold true that girls are the experts of their own lives. The Policy Center is committed to accurately portraying the voices and experiences of girls.*

## Process for Conducting the Research

Participant Selection Criteria. After securing Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from the FL DJJ for a purposeful criterion sampling research design, the Policy Center was provided with a complete list of names of all girls meeting our selection criteria: (1) girls' home county was one of five in the First Coast (Duval, Nassau, Clay, St. Johns, or Baker County); and (2) incarcerated in a residential program that had agreed to participate in research at the time of data extract. There were a total of three data extracts, which included the range of residential program security levels (low-risk, moderate-risk, and high-risk facilities). Girls with an expected date of release within 30 days were excluded.

Interviews with Girls in Residential Programs. In collaboration with residential providers, dates were scheduled for trained interviewers to visit programs and conduct face-to-face interviews with participants. Residential program staff secured parental consent from guardians for their daughters to participate in the research on behalf of the Policy Center. On the day of the scheduled visit, girls with a parental consent met with a Policy Center interviewer, who explained the project, the procedures, time commitment, risk and benefits of participation, and safeguards to maintaining confidentiality. For girls who agreed to participate (assent), interviews were conducted in a private space in order to maintain confidentiality of the girls' responses. Each interview took approximately one hour.

Data Collection Period. Interviews began in March 2014 and ended in November 2014. A total of nine residential programs were visited. The matching data request from DJJ was provided in February 2015.

Instruments. The girls' interview instrument was created by the Policy Center research staff, using questions from existing measures validated on adolescent girls, in conjunction with questions created by researchers to evaluate the complexities of participants' lives. The intent of the semi-structured interview was to create a space to listen and learn about girls' experiences with the juvenile justice system, and to get their valuable input about how to improve services for girls in the local area. The major constructs measured by the assessment included: Plans for Reentry; Experiences with the Juvenile Justice System; Pathways into the System, Including Identity and Discrimination Experiences; Family History / Life Story; Dating and Relationships; Substance Use; Mental Health; Child Welfare and Educational System Experiences; and Recommendations/Insights.

Matching Data. Data from girls' interviews was matched with Juvenile Justice Information System (JJIS) disposition

histories (for example, index offenses, days in secure detention, prior misdemeanor and felony offenses, previous commitments), demographics (age, race/ethnicity, ZIP code), and available PACT assessment data.

## Data Analyses

Quantitative Analysis. Each participant was assigned a research code. The data collected from the assessment was entered into an SPSS database, and included transcription of open-ended questions. Using the ID code sheet, the demographic, disposition, and delinquency history data from the DJJ JJIS extract was merged for each girl into the database. The table in the Appendix illustrates the questions or data points used to answer the research questions in aggregate form. Descriptive statistics were employed to look at themes. Variables of interest from the DJJ matching data (age at first arrest, most serious offense at commitment, number of times in secure detention, prior felonies, misdemeanors, violation[s] of probation) were analyzed for frequency and mean. Variables of interest and commonalities included running away, substance use, homelessness, death of caregiver, and parenting. Data was examined through t-tests and chi square analyses for differences in experiences by race/ethnicity and county. Additionally, questions that allowed for multiple responses were listed in order of highest response to lowest response, otherwise known as a rank order.

Qualitative Analysis. Girls' qualitative data was extracted from the SPSS database to develop codebooks for each domain (for example, reasons for runaway or violation of probation, recommendations for improving juvenile justice system, etc.). Codebooks were developed in teams of three. Coders individually coded qualitative raw data, met to discuss the significant themes, and developed a final codebook complete with definitions and inclusion examples. Where appropriate, qualitative code families/themes were inserted as values under newly created variables that could be analyzed in aggregate form. Girls' quotes are used throughout to provide context to themes. Ideas, themes, and patterns were analyzed for the purpose of illustrating commonalities rather than for descriptions of individual views and experiences.

## Participants

Over the course of the eight-month data collection period, 32 (thirty-two) girls were interviewed throughout the state of Florida. Each girl is currently incarcerated in one of Florida's 10 female juvenile residential programs. All girls interviewed are members of the First Coast community, representing Duval (21), Nassau (3), Clay (7), or St. Johns counties (1). Of the 32 girls, 56% were African American / Black, 44% were Caucasian, 0% were Hispanic, and 0% were "Other" as identified by the Department of Juvenile Justice, which is representative of the First Coast committed population of girls. When asked to self-identify their race/ethnicity during the interview, the girls identified themselves as Black or African American (47%), Caucasian (34%), Mixed/multiple race (12%), Native American (3%), and Hispanic (3%). For purposes of data analysis, the girls' self-identified race/ethnicity was used. The average age of girls participating in the study was 16 years old, the youngest girl was 14 years old, and the oldest was 18 years old. The average length of stay for girls in our sample was eight months. At the time of interview, 22% of the girls were expected to be released within 30 days, 46% had one to three months remaining in the program, and 28% had four to seven months' time remaining. Almost 3 in 4 of the girls (72%) were working with program staff on their transition back home or on other arrangements.

## Limitations

Although we reached our targeted sample size, these research findings are limited to the experiences and voices of girls from whom we were able to obtain parental consent to interview. Due to communication barriers and/or guardians denying consent, two girls in our target sample did not participate in the research. Additionally, two girls chose not to participate or had other obligations occurring at the same time as the program visit, such as taking the GED. Additionally, this research is only generalizable to the First Coast communities of Duval, Nassau, Clay, and St. Johns counties. No girls from Baker County were incarcerated at the time of the study.

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

This research study identified common life experiences and key pathways into the juvenile justice system, as experienced by girls from the First Coast. The extent of involvement in the system, reasons for commitment, and life experiences leading up to incarceration are explored. Differences by race/ethnicity and county are noted.

## Extent of Involvement in the Juvenile Justice System

First Coast Girls Entering the System at Young Ages: 44% of girls’ age at first arrest was 13 years old or younger. The data suggests that Black girls are being arrested at earlier ages than White girls: 53% of Black girls and 27% of White girls had first arrest at age 13 or younger.

Prior offenses: 31% of the girls in this sample had no prior felonies, 47% had one or two felonies, and 22% had three or more. On average, the girls had 2.7 prior misdemeanors and 1.5 felonies on their record. The types of offenses include misdemeanor battery, aggravated battery, petit theft, and grand larceny theft. The data suggests that girls of color, on average, have fewer felonies than White girls: Black girls had 1.4 felonies; Hispanic, Native American, and more than one race had 0.83 prior felonies (see table below).

Average stays in secure detention: All girls had previously been in secure detention at least three times. One third (34%) had been 3–4 times; another third (34%) 5–7 times, and 31% had been in secure detention 8 or more times. Number of stays in detention does not seem to be related to number of priors or differences by race/ethnicity or county.

Recommitments. A majority of the girls (72%) had never been in a residential placement prior to their current placement. However, one in four girls (25%) had been in one residential placement prior to current placement, and one girl (3%) had been in three juvenile justice residential placements.

## Reasons for Commitment

Violation of Probation (VOP) (50%). Half of the girls were in their commitment program for a *non-law breaking violation of probation as their most serious offense at the time of disposition*. Of these girls, 38% had no prior felony charges, 44% had one or two felonies, and 19% had three or more prior felonies. Although the numbers are small, some disparities by county are seen where 100% of the girls from Nassau County were committed for VOP, compared to 57% of girls from Clay County, and 43% of girls from Duval County. During the interviews, 91% of girls self-reported they had violated probation at some point (although it may not have been the reason for disposition). 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%).

Other Offenses (50%). The remaining girls were committed for criminal offenses (non-VOP). These included

**Table 3:** Average Number of Priors by Race/ Ethnicity

RACE/Ethnicity	Average Number of Prior Misdemeanors	Average Number of Prior Felonies
White N=11	2.1	2.0
Black N=15	2.8	1.4
*Other N=6	3.3	0.8
<b>Total N=32</b>	<b>2.7</b>	<b>1.5</b>

\*Other includes Hispanic, Native American, and more than one race

Source: Author's analysis of DJJ JJIS matching data

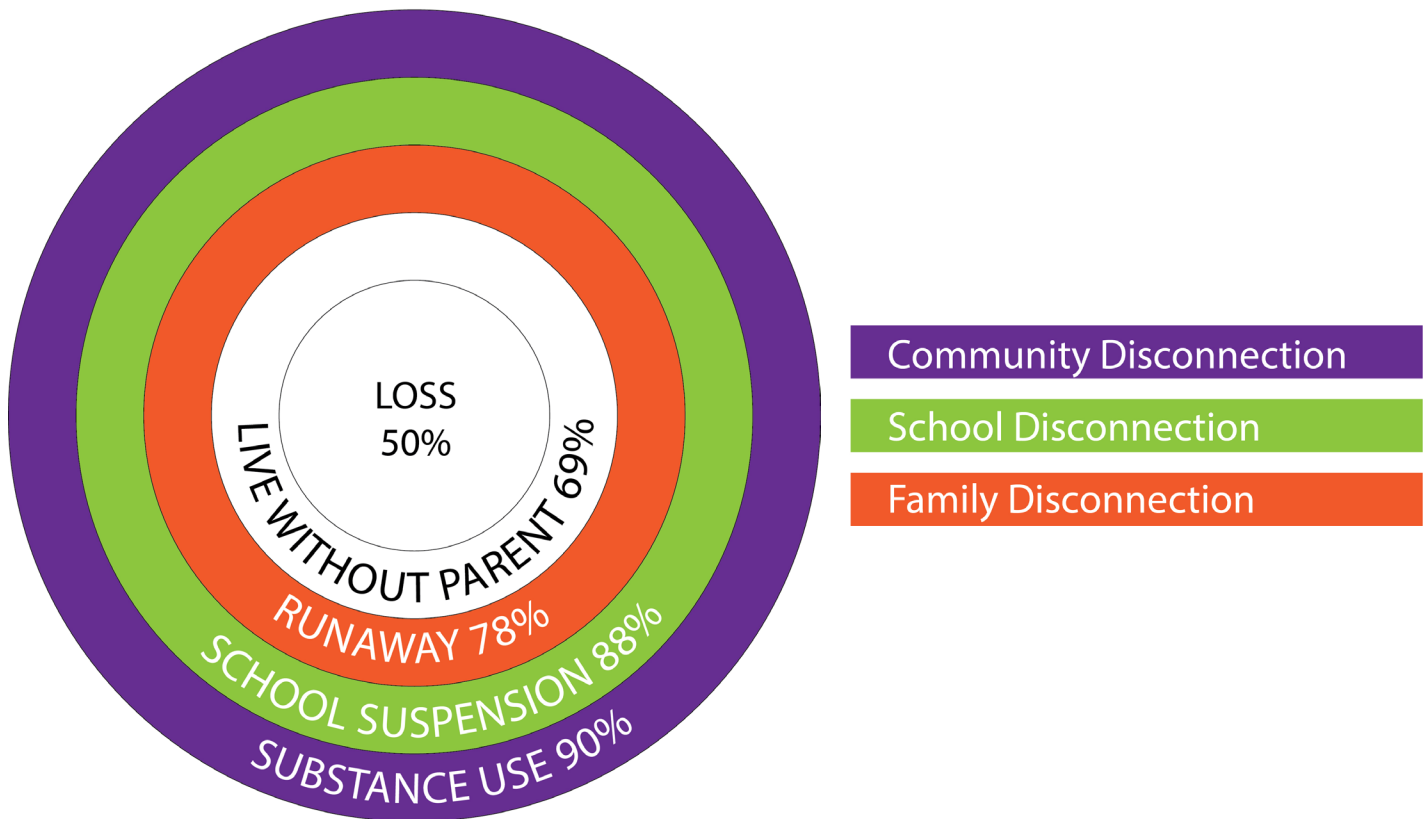
misdeemeanor assault or battery (13%); felony aggravated assault or battery (9%); auto theft (6%); burglary (6%); escape from secure detention or residential program (3%); obstruction of justice with violence (3%); sexual battery (3%); or vandalism (3%). Of these girls, 25% had 0 prior felonies.

## Life Experiences

Girls were asked a series of questions about their life experiences prior to incarceration. The findings in this section are the aggregated life experiences that many of the girls from the First Coast have in common, including: living situations; grief and loss; discrimination and/or victimization experiences at home, in school, or in the community; and treatment by systems. Eleven common experiences were identified. At the epicenter of girls' experiences, there appears to be significant loss (for example, death of a caregiver, parent incarceration, abandonment) that contributes to multiple "disconnections" and shows up in behaviors (running away, coping and survival strategies, suspensions, substance abuse). Figure 2 shows these "disconnections" after the experience of family trauma that resulted in 69% of the girls

**Figure 2**

Girls Disconnection Through A Series of Complex Trauma



living without a parent (out-of-home placement): 78% ran away from home (family disconnection), 88% were suspended at school (school disconnection), and 90% used substances (community disconnection / disconnection from the self). The responses by the education, child protection, and juvenile justice systems have, in many ways, further disconnected girls from the community.

Table 4 shows the percentage of girls experiencing each type of adverse life experience, but it is important to note that each girl experienced a variety of these, which can lead to cumulative and complex traumas. On average, the girls experienced six of the life experiences below, with the fewest at two, and most experiencing 10 of these.



**Table 4:** Girls' Life Experiences

Type of Life Experience	% of Girls Responding "yes" N=32
Substance use (daily, weekly, monthly)	91%
Suspension or expulsion	88%
Runaway	78%
Lived without parents	69%
Experienced the loss of other relatives or friends in the last year	53%
Arrested for fighting with someone in household	50%
Experienced the loss of a close family member in the last year	41%
Had been pregnant	34%
Foster care	28%
Had to perform a sexual act to the person providing a place to stay, food, clothing or transportation	25%
Considered themselves homeless	25%

### *Girls' Resiliency*

Girls were asked about the biggest life / social or relational challenge they had overcome. Girls' responses provide a glimpse into their lived experiences. They talked about their living situations, "being homeless," "getting off the streets," and "being in the foster care system and didn't have parents." They talked about violence, "discovering I was born from rape when I was 16," "Past trauma that happened when I was little, I finally told myself that it wasn't my fault," "Rape at age 13. Stranger picked [me] up while I was walking home. I have since processed it and prayed about it." They talked about personal loss, "mom died when I was five," "mom who passed away from AIDS," "I had a miscarriage." They talked about overcoming substance abuse, getting through being incarcerated, and overcoming their anger and emotions.

Their experiences also provide insight into their strengths: strong interpersonal skills, being a leader, having goals, being athletic, being creative, and having survival skills and resiliency. When asked what most excited them or what they were hopeful about when leaving the residential program, the majority of girls indicated seeing and being with their families and going back home.

### *Living Situations*

Lived without Parents / Foster Care. One in four (28%)

girls had been in foster care at some point in their life. One girl stated she had lived in five group homes throughout her adolescence. "[My] first placement in foster care I didn't like. They were horrible. The family didn't pay attention to me. Second placement was with my mother's ex-boyfriend (we were close). I liked it better." Another girl noted that she had lived in "lots of foster care placements," while another girl stated she had been placed in a foster home for three months with someone she didn't know. More than half of the girls (69%) (including girls in foster care) had lived somewhere without their parents. There were significant differences by county: more girls from Duval County had lived without their parents, 86% compared to 36% non-Duval. There were also significant differences by race/ethnicity: 81% of girls of color lived without their parents, compared to 46% of White girls. Girls who had lived without their parents often lived with their grandmothers, significant others, or at the Youth Crisis Center (shelter).

Runaway. Three out of four girls (78%) had experienced running away at some point in their life. Running away is often a path that leads girls into the juvenile justice system. 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 shared: "Ran away because Dad would always chose [sic] his girlfriends over me"; "I ran away because my mom doesn't give me attention unless I am locked up"; and "Ran because family. Little brothers target me and jump me. [She has] no relationship with Mom anymore because Mom didn't believe that [she] was raped. And older brother was locked up." Other girls ran due to substance use/abuse: "I was addicted to drugs and the adrenaline." Another girl shared that she ran away because of the abuse she was experiencing at home, and even noted that DCF had numerous abuse reports. Thirty-two percent of the girls who had run away also considered themselves homeless at some point. The majority of girls (81%) who reported

domestic violence had also run away. The majority of girls (82%) who had been pregnant had also run away.

Homelessness. One out of four girls (25%) considered themselves homeless at some point. Other girls stated they did not consider themselves homeless because they knew they could go home or because they had a place to sleep. Homelessness affected many of the girls who also had other significant life events. Every girl who considered herself homeless reported living in out-of-home placement and having been suspended from school. Half of the girls who reported performing a sexual act on a person providing them clothing, food, shelter, or transportation had considered themselves homeless at some point. Additionally, 36% of the girls who had been pregnant considered themselves homeless.

Caretaker Roles. Slightly more than half of the girls (53%) reported feeling like they needed to take care of their parent / primary caregiver, and 44% reported taking care of younger siblings. Some girls took care of sick family members: “Mom is sick with cancer. I help her with her dressings, bathing her, cooking, etc.”; “Sometimes I worry about my mom and grandma when they get sick. I also had to help take care of my grandma when she was recovering from surgery.” Other girls felt like they needed to care for their parents for other reasons. For example, “All the time. When Dad gets drunk I have to take his keys and hide them. He would beat me in the morning for doing so.” Another participant had a similar response: “They [parent/guardian] are childish. Would have to care for Mom when she was drunk and when she would get beat by her baby daddy I was there to calm her down.” Another girl said she had overcome by growing up fast: “I had to raise my younger siblings and cousin.”

### *Grief, Loss, and Traumatic Events*

Girls involved in the study have experienced grief and loss: 41% of the girls had a close family member die (for example, primary caregiver) and 53% had a family member or a friend pass away in the last year. The majority of girls (72%) had someone close to them spend a great deal of time in the hospital at some point in their life. Several girls identified that they had lost their mothers and siblings: “My older brother was murdered.” Other girls shared traumatic experiences of their friends being murdered or going missing: “My best friend was shot and killed at a party.” Some girls had experienced multiple deaths in the last year: “My uncle died, friend was shot [he was] like a brother, Grandma has been in hospital. Mom passed away several years ago”; “My mom and uncle passed away.” Although the question asked only about people passing away in the last year, many girls opened up and shared stories of cumulative loss of family and friends and layering of trauma over time: “Grandpa died in 2010, girlfriend died in 2014, Mom and Grandma both have been in the hospital and are really sick.”

### *Victimization*

Adults Who Hurt, Let Down, or Violated Trust. Girls were asked if there were any teachers, staff, or trusted adults in their lives who had hurt them, let them down, or violated their trust. Twenty-two of the girls (69%) provided an answer as to who and/or how. Girls shared stories of abuse: (“My dad raped me...”), abandonment (“Daddy, by not being around”), loss (“Yes, my dad. I trusted him until he went to prison. My mom, for passing away from a heart attack, I still blame her”), and let down (Mom, I didn’t think she loved me, she wouldn’t come to things that I asked her to come to). Mothers / mother figures were identified nine times, fathers / father figures were identified eight times, and other family members such as aunts, siblings, grandparents, and godparents were identified five times. Two girls indicated a staff member from their program or a community-based program, and two others identified God as the source of hurt, letdown, or violation of trust. Six girls indicated two or more people.

Domestic Violence at Home. According to the data provided by the Department of Juvenile Justice, 41% of girls had a domestic violence–related offense in their delinquency history. When girls were asked if they had ever been arrested for fighting with someone in their household (mother, father, other relative, siblings, friends, or romantic partner), 50% reported they had. While some girls may have multiple people involved, the person that came up most frequently was



mother / mother figure (50%), followed by siblings (31%), other relative (25%), and father / father figure (13%). “Other relative” was identified as grandmothers and parental partners.

Sexual Exploitation. With growing attention on the commercial sexual exploitation of girls in Florida, researchers wanted to identify how many girls involved in the system who reside in North Florida may have been exposed to trafficking. Girls were asked: “Prior to entering this program, did you have to pay a fee/money for a place to stay, food, clothes, or transportation to anyone? If so, how did you pay? Did you ever have to perform a sexual act to the person providing you a place to stay, food, clothing, or transportation?” One in four girls (25%) indicated they performed a sexual act on the person providing them with a place to stay, food, clothing, or transportation. All of them had run away from home prior to placement; 88% had lived somewhere without their parents.

### *Education Experiences*

Half of the girls in this study were last enrolled in high school before incarceration, 16% were in middle school, 13% were in an alternative school, 13% had dropped out, with the remainder working on their GED or enrolled in virtual school.

High rates of suspension. Of the 32 girls, the majority (88%) had been suspended and/or expelled while in school. Girls shared the following reasons for their suspension or expulsion: physical aggression (64%), internalizing behaviors (43%), truancy (36%), classroom disruptions (29%), and relational aggression (11%).

Dropout. One in three girls (34%) in this study provided context to why they dropped out of school or why they left school and chose to continue online or obtain their GED. Girls described being kicked out of school, struggling in school, missing too much school, running away, pregnancy, and needing to support themselves as some of the reasons. Twenty-nine percent of girls indicated they received failing grades while in school. Reasons shared for failing grades were due to truancy, the work being too hard, other things going on in her life, suspensions, her teacher was unhelpful/unfair, she got behind in work and it was too challenging to catch up, and no one was around to help them.

### *Treatment by Community and Systems*

Victimization at school. Girls were prompted to describe their experiences at school, their relationships with peers and teachers, and if there were incidents at school that made them feel uncomfortable or if they had experienced victimizing at school. Based on their responses, interviewers noted if what she described was an indication of victimization at school by peers, school staff, or unresponsive school policies. More than half of girls (60%) had experienced victimization by peers, teachers, and/or school policies. Examples shared by girls included students who bullied them or were aggravating, and kids who were mean. There were accounts of teachers talking poorly about their families, not being fair, and/or teachers / school administrators not doing anything when incidents were reported.

Peer Victimization in Program. The majority of girls (78%) reported fights in their program; however, the majority of girls also reported they were not afraid of being physically attacked or hurt. Nearly one in five girls (22%) was “somewhat afraid” or “very afraid” of being physically attacked or hurt by another girl in their residential program.

Rude/Hostile Treatment by Law Enforcement. More than half (68%) of girls said their arresting officer treated them rude, was hostile, or a combination of the two.

*“Yes, he was rough and violent. He told me my mom should have beat my ass.”*

*“That man was nasty. He didn’t read me my rights.”*

*“I was so scared. They treated me the way I treated them. I was smart with them so they reciprocated.”*

*“One officer was fine and the other was cussing me out.”*

*“Treated me like shit. Kind of scared. I thought I was pregnant at the time and he shoved me against the gate and it*

*scared me.”*

*“They treated me bad. They twisted my arm in the wrong way and threw me against the car.”*

*“Should have seen why I did what I did rather than yell. Some have tried to help but ultimately, they would drop me off back home.”*

Unfair Treatment in Court. More than half (69%) of girls felt they / their family were not treated fairly in court.

*“Met with PD [public defender] five minutes before court, was told to plead guilty, or I would be charged as an adult.”*

*“I feel like I could have been given less time. I was given 6 months for violating probation.”*

*“I don’t deserve to be in a program. It changed my mindset—I’m not violent and don’t have a lot of charges. I don’t want or need to be in a moderate risk. I’m not violent but here I got into a fight. Once you’re in the program you’re a different person for the worse.”*

*“They put me in a mental health facility first. They should have put me in low risk, not lockdown. I don’t have enough points to be here.”*

*“At court, it was me versus my mom. There should be investigations before sentencing, to figure out what’s really going on, to hear the child’s side. Probation isn’t good, it’s a setup for failure.”*

Treatment by Probation Officers. The majority of girls felt their probation officer treated them fairly, but one in three girls (33%) did not think their probation officer treated them fairly.

*“Parents would call JPO all the time to complain about everything she did. He [probation officer] finally told her if he got another call from her parents he was going to violate her. Her parents would use that against her.”*

*“Because I don’t like going to school and wanted to do online school. That helped me and she [probation officer] wouldn’t let me.”*

*“I violated three times but a lot more – [probation officer] cut me some slack.”*

*“Newest JPO treated me fairly. Old JPO did not.”*

Treatment by Staff in Residential Programs. Almost half of girls (47%) reported that staff had restrained or used force with them. Nine percent of girls felt “somewhat afraid” or “very afraid” of being physically attacked or hurt by a staff member in the program. When asked if they knew use of force or restraint would happen, they recounted:

*“It wasn’t PAR [Protective Action Response] but takedown after going after a girl. They twisted my arm. I had X-rays. Now they say I have a slope in my shoulder. They only prescribe me ibuprofen because that’s all they can .... But it still hurts.”*

*“No, staff slung me out of my chair and pushed me to the floor.”*

*“Yes, for fighting.”*

### Ethnic Identity and Gender Discrimination

Perception of Unfair Treatment Due to Ethnic Identity and Gender. Most girls (91%) said they were never threatened or hurt because of their racial identity; however, 25% of girls reported unfair treatment because of their race/ethnicity.

“Happens a lot, especially in here – get called Snow White, snowflake, snow bunny, and cracker ...” or “People make comments to me about my skin being so dark, such as ‘you’re too dark to get sunburned.’” Girls also retold stories of facing discrimination in school and by persons of authority: “Cop pulled me over while I was walking home. He arrested me for a warrant I had and called me the N word.”

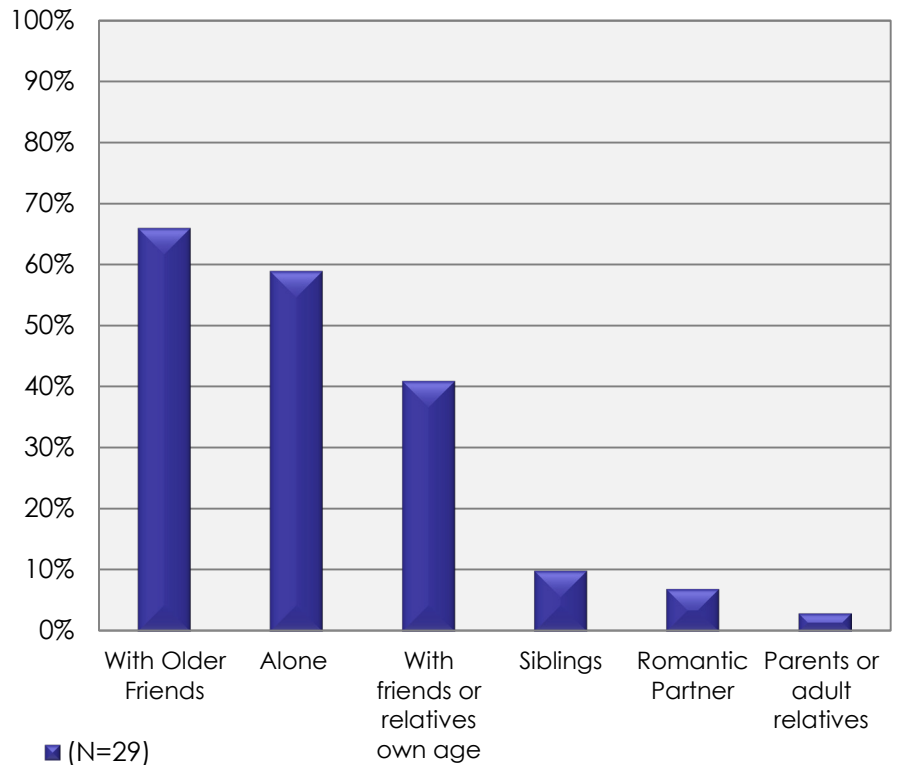
The majority of girls (84%) said they were “never” treated unfairly by teachers, peers, or other adults due to their gender;

16% of girls had experienced gender discrimination, all of whom were girls of color. “Wanted to do things that boys do but people wouldn’t let me, like football, work on cars.”

## Specialized Needs

**Daily Substance Use.** A number of girls noted that they were concerned about going back to substance use after leaving the program. Half of the girls (53%) reported they used substances daily (prior to placement), 13% of girls said they used substances more than once a day. Nine percent of girls had said they never used substances, and the remaining girls (25%) had used substances less often than once a day such as on the weekends, several times a week, or once or twice a month. When asked to identify whom they drink or use substances with (multiple response), the majority of girls reported using substances with older friends (66%), but 59% of girls also reported using substances alone. Girls shared that they use substances when they feel stressed, nervous, tense, full of worries or problems (38%), or when they are bored or to have fun (38%).

**Figure 3:** Whom do you drink or use substances with?



**Daily Medication.** More than half (66%) of girls were taking medication every day while in placement. Some of the medication girls were taking included allergy medications or birth control. Other girls were taking psychotropic medications to assist with the management of anxiety, depression, and other serious symptoms of mental illness.

**Pregnancy and Parenting.** Girls were asked about their experiences with pregnancy and parenting. One-third of girls indicated they had been pregnant at some point. Differences by race/ethnicity show that 47% of Black / African American girls and 67% of girls who identified as two or more races reported having been pregnant. Of the 11 girls who had been pregnant in the past, one girl was pregnant at the time of interview, three girls currently do not have custody of their child(ren), one girl has custody of her child, and six had not carried to term. One girl shared that she miscarried due to drug use, while another lost her baby after she had been raped.

To better understand the circumstances and services teen mothers need, girls were asked about what supports they needed during their pregnancy or after childbirth. Two girls stated they would like to have parenting classes, with one stating she would also like birthing classes. Other themes revolve around housing, financial, and emotional supports. Girls shared:

*“It would have been nice to have housing and stability.”*

*“I would have liked to have had a place that could have helped me graduate high school while I was pregnant.”*

*“I need someone to praise me and provide support for me to get my baby back.”*

*“Need a stable place to live.”*

*“Need financial support. DCF put me on child support even though I don’t have a job. Parents cover things she [her daughter] needs. I signed over my rights but she [her daughter] is safe with my parents.”*

Transitioning Back to the Community. Girls were asked what they were most worried about when transitioning back to their community. Girls were worried about their relationships with family, their living situations, returning to detention / getting in trouble again, and education. Other girls responded with themes of fear of being on probation again, fear of relapse, and fear of their safety. It is important to note that 12 girls indicated that they were not worried about anything.

Girls were also asked what they are excited and hopeful about after leaving their residential programs.

*“Going home and being a mom.”*

*“Being home, going back to school, and getting a job.”*

*“Going to church with pastor and seeing my mom and being home with my dad.”*

*“Succeeding in life.”*

*“Starting college.”*

*“Going to see my baby.”*

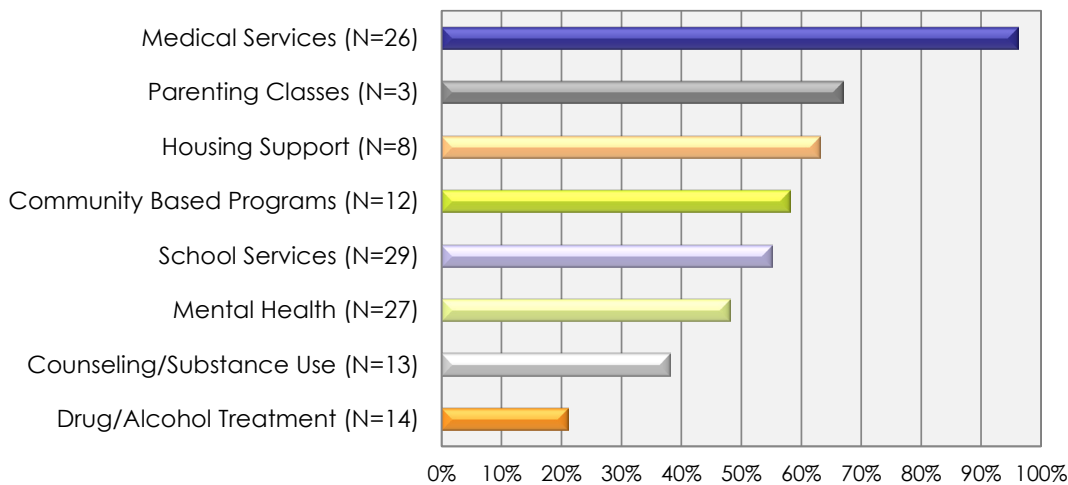
## Findings: Girls' Perceptions of Services (and People) Most Helpful in the Local Community

The following section reflects the accounts of girls regarding the services (and people) that were most helpful in the local community (before incarceration), during DJJ residential placement, and desired after incarceration.

### Services Before Incarceration

During the interviews, girls were asked several questions about the services that had been provided to them (in their community prior to incarceration), and if they considered them helpful. Girls responded either “yes,” “no,” or “not applicable” if they had not utilized the services. Many girls utilized medical (96%), education/school service (91%), and mental health (84 %) services in the community. Less than half accessed/utilized drug/alcohol treatment programs, counseling/substance abuse for family/caregiver, community-based programs, housing support/shelter, and parenting classes. The helpfulness of each service that was utilized is rated in Figure 4.

**Figure 4:** Services that were Helpful in the Community



Girls reported that medical services had been most helpful, whereas drug/alcohol treatment had been least helpful for girls who reported utilizing the service. Roughly half of girls found mental health services and school/educational services helpful, but less than 40% of girls found counseling/substance use services for

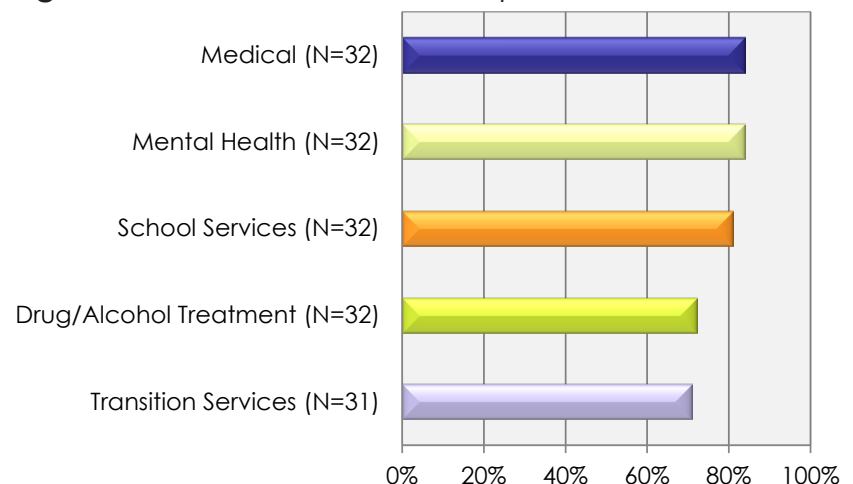
family/caregiver helpful. Ten girls reported that counseling/substance use services for family would have been helpful, but were not offered, and seven girls reported that community-based programs would have been helpful to them, but were not offered. This did not vary by county.

### Services During DJJ Residential Placement

Girls were also asked if the services they were receiving in their residential programs were helpful. All girls reported receiving medical, mental health, school services, and drug/alcohol treatment, and the vast majority of girls reported services to be helpful (see Figure 5).

By comparison, with the exception of medical/health services, the vast majority of

**Figure 5:** Services That Were Helpful in Residential



girls rated the same services less helpful in the community than in residential placement: medical/health services (96% community vs. 84% residential), school services (55% community vs. 81% residential), mental health (48% community vs. 84% residential), and drug/alcohol (21% community vs. 72% residential) (see Figure 6).

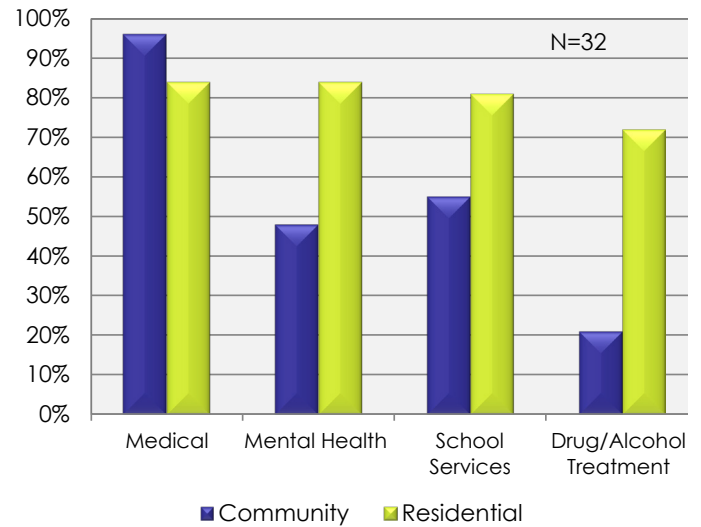
### Services Desired After Incarceration

The majority of girls believe that all of the following services would be helpful in the community for girls: work / job skill opportunities (97%), having a mentor (90%), individual/family therapy (88%), leadership opportunities (84%), opportunity to get together with other young women / women that have had similar experiences, who are having success (84%), website for resources (75%), girls and young women's groups (72%), and community service hours (69%).

Opportunities for work / job skills, individual/family therapy, and connecting with women with similar experiences were the top three services they were likely to use. Overall, fewer girls reported they would be likely to use those services.

Girls provided insight as to why they would not access certain services, including transportation and lack of access to a computer to utilize the website. Additionally, some services were not needed by girls and others were not interesting to girls. Several girls noted they did not want to be surrounded by other girls.

**Figure 6:** Services that were “Helpful” in the Community vs. Services in Residential Placement



**Table 5:** Do you think the following services would be meaningful for girls to have in your community?

N = 32	Yes	No	Don't Know
Girls & young women's groups	72%	22%	6%
Website for resources	75%	9%	16%
Leadership opportunities	84%	6%	9%
Opportunity to get together with other young women/ women that have had similar experiences that are having successes in their lives	84%	13%	3%
Work/job skills	97%	0%	3%
Have a mentor	90%	3%	7%
Individual/family therapy	88%	9%	3%
Community service hours	69%	19%	13%

**Table 6:** How likely would you be to use the following services if they existed in your community?

N = 32	Likely	Neutral	Unlikely
Girls & young women's groups	56%	22%	22%
Website for resources	72%	16%	13%
Leadership opportunities	72%	19%	9%
Get together with other women that have had similar experiences, who are having successes in their lives	78%	6%	16%
Work/job skills	83%	13%	3%
Have a mentor	72%	22%	6%
Individual/family therapy	78%	9%	13%
Community service hours	50%	31%	19%

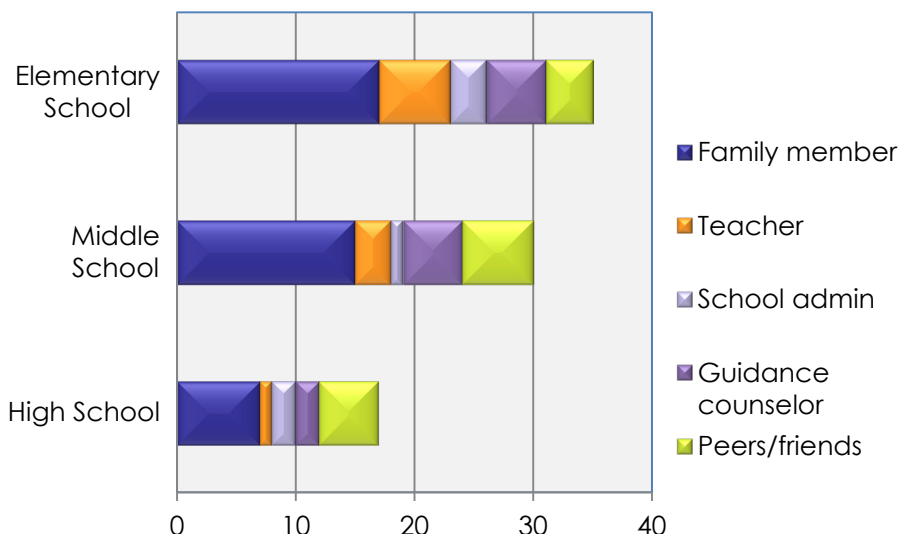


## Supportive People Along the Continuum

The following section explores the relationships in girls' lives, including those who have supported them and those who they believe can make a positive difference in the lives of girls.

**People/Supports at School.** Girls were asked who they turned to for support while in elementary school, middle school, and high school. Girls felt most supported while in elementary school; this support declines in middle school. Family members were the people girls referred to most often, regardless of grade level. Peers, counselors, and teachers were the people girls went to most often for support, aside from their families. At some point along the educational path, eight girls shared that they had “no one” for support and one girl identified herself as her support system at some point.

**Figure 7: People / Supports at School**



**Family Supports.** Girls were asked about adults in their lives who have supported them. Many of the girls responded by talking about how their mothers, grandmothers, and aunts have supported or encouraged them.

*“Yes, Mom and Grandma. Mom gives good advice and my grandma lets me stay with her when I am fighting with my mom.”*

*“My mom, she will help me do anything I want and she will get involved too.”*

*“Mom and Grandma are there if I need to talk or come to them.”*

*“Mom, Grandma, aunties, and cousins, by just being there and always being by my side.”*

*“Mom and aunt are encouraging and supportive and give good advice. Staff from old program.”*

As well as other family members:

*“Older sister and Mom encourage me no matter what, savvy sisters (from detention) has helped me in here and Ms. X.”*

*“Yes, my foster parents because they helped me with anything I needed and school.”*

*“Mom, uncle, grandparents, aunts, and cousins, as well as two family friends. All these people encourage me to do good.”*

*“Brother and cousin, they provided basic needs.”*

*“Dad is always there. I get my strength from him. Listening to his history and see what he’s done, his determination. He is my hero.”*

**Staff Supports.** There were 14 instances in which girls identified staff by name, who had supported or encouraged them within their community-based programs, as well as at the detention center, residential programs, and people with DJJ<sup>1</sup>:

*“Caseworker, I forgot her name, she helped me when I was feeling down. She got me clothes and stuff. My aunties keep me on the right track.”*

*“Yes, Ms. X (Y). She never gave up on me.”*

<sup>1</sup> Responses with individual names have been changed to Xs and organization names changed to Ys to protect confidentiality.

*“My old JPO, X, she was supportive and gave me structure. She put herself in my life as a mom figure. Gave support. My old foster mom – X – was like another mother figure. She raised me well (for a little over a year).”*

*“Staff in Duval detention center encourages me not to give up or get locked up.”*

Other girls identified mental health professionals as adults who have supported and encouraged them.

*“One counselor, X, helped me set goals. She stayed with me even when she got promoted and didn’t see people anymore.”*

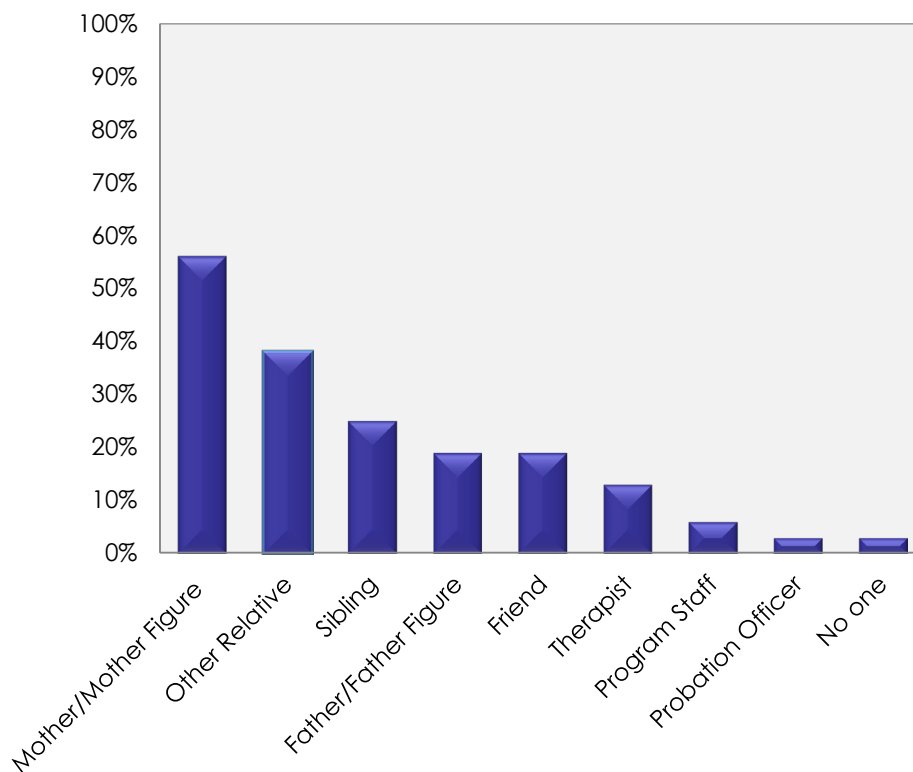
*“Therapist and case manager are easy to talk to – every other therapist agree[d] with what you say, these two communicate back and make me feel like talking a while.”*

*“Ms. X & Ms. X who used to work here, they were there to talk to, they made time to talk.”*

*“When I came here, Ms. X. Even though I ran the streets and prostituted, she didn’t judge me. She was there for me and saw my baby in the hospital when I couldn’t. She took pictures. She’s like my angel.”*

Who Girls Will Seek After Placement/Transition. During the interviews, girls were asked who they would turn to for help and assistance once they were out of their program. Multiple responses could be provided. More than half of the girls identified their mothers / mother figures (see Figure 8).

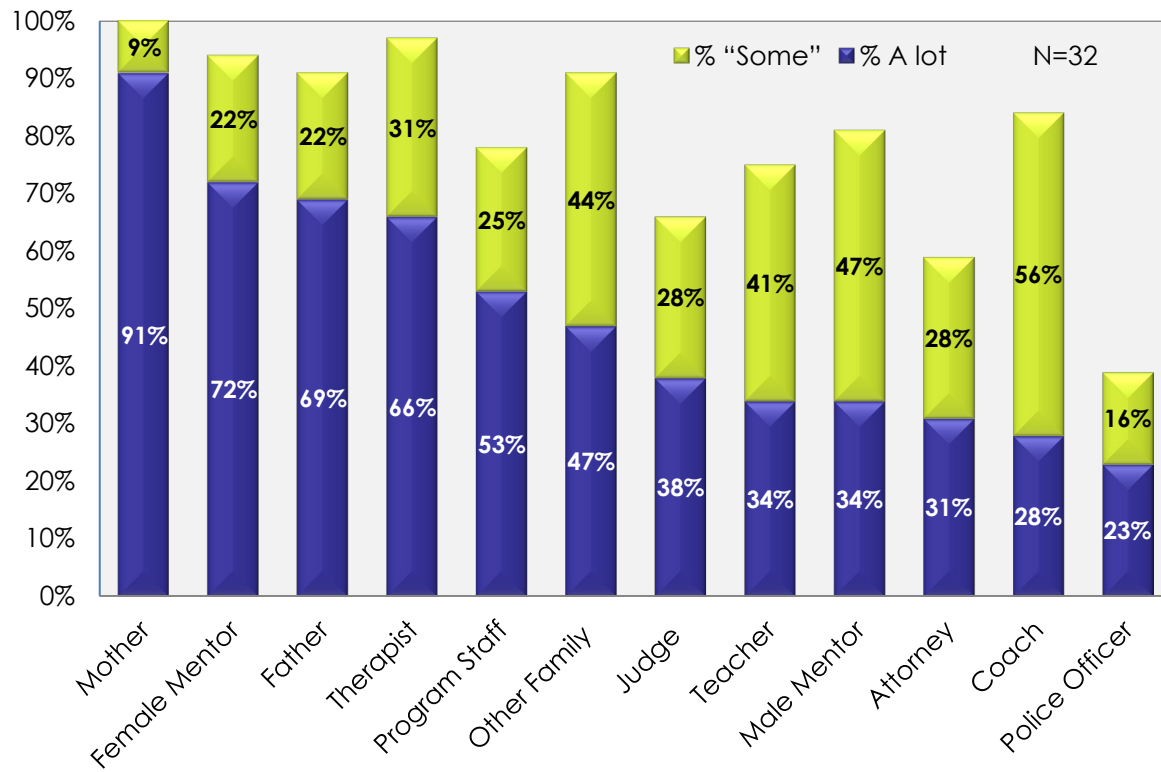
**Figure 8: Who will you turn for help / assistance?**



## Girls’ Identification of Who Can Make a Positive Difference

The girls were asked about individuals who could make a positive difference in a girl’s life. Each person could be identified as making a positive difference “a lot” to “some” to “a little” to “not at all” or “I don’t know.” The graph below shows the people along the continuum that girls identified could make the biggest (positive) difference in a girl’s life, in order of greatest impact. All of the girls felt mothers could make a positive difference. This was followed by rating female mentors (94%), fathers (91%), therapists (97%), program staff (78%), and other family as the people who could make a positive difference. Judges, teachers, male mentors, attorneys, coaches, and police officers were also identified as people who could make a difference.



**Figure 9:** Who Can make a Positive Difference

## Findings: Girls' Recommendations for Improving Systems for Girls Across the Continuum

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The following summary reviews girls' recommendations for improving the response to girls in the juvenile justice system, with specific attention to the child welfare system, juvenile court, detention, probation, and residential programs.

### Child Welfare / Child Protection System

Twenty-eight percent of the girls had previous child welfare system involvement. When asked about their recommendations concerning the child protection system, girls responded in a variety of ways. The major themes that emerged most often centered on *safety*, *oversight practices*, and *child protection staff within the system*; particular emphasis was placed on experiences of abuse.

One girl reported that a DCF worker once came to take pictures of her bruises, but never followed up to ensure her safety in the future. A second girl stated that she had been abused in foster care and said that DCF needs to handle those situations better, and recognize that children are often abused in child welfare placements. Girls recommended that foster parents be vetted more thoroughly in order to screen out potential abusers or those who might become foster parents because of a financial incentive.

*Other responses relating to safety and abuse included the following:*

*"Do better at following up. Kids are too scared to say anything. Would it take someone to die before you do anything? Do your job, or don't do it at all."*

*"Further investigate calls and don't just believe parents."*

*"You don't know what it's like in the house until you lived in the house. Child should have someone to go to without foster parent knowing."*

*"Wish they would do more than ask questions. If there are reports of physical and sexual abuse, they should do something before it's too late, the kid is hurting."*

Girls also made recommendations about opportunities for children in the child welfare system, to spend time with family. For instance, one girl recommended that parents should be able to have unsupervised visits; another recommended that parents with domestic charges have supervised field trips. Another girl recommended that girls with children should be awarded the custody they are seeking.

Recommendations about staff included that case managers should visit frequently and therapists should be available at any time. Girls also expressed a desire for more accessible mental health services, communication between staff and parents, and "more of a voice in what's going on."

### Court Processes

When girls were asked about their recommendations for improving court processes, 31 girls responded, with major themes emerging around *girls wanting to have their voices heard* and around *changing unfair court processes*. One in two girls (58%) reported not being able to say anything to the judge or court staff. They reported minimal contact with public defenders and less than half (45%) said public defenders were helpful. Additionally, 44% reported that the legal process was not explained to them so that they could understand what was happening to them. One third of girls (n = 11) reported that they were not given adequate opportunities to have their voice heard. Girls shared some of the following

recommendations: “Give me a chance to talk”; “Let us share our side of the story”; and “[I] should be able to talk.” Girls also reported themes of unfair court processes and severe punishment. Responses in this category included:

*“The judge may make some people an example to show others.”*

*“They charged me for a crime that wasn’t true. I had to sit in detention for 35 days until they proved it wasn’t true.”*

*“See both sides of the story, not just what the parent says.”*

*“Don’t lie about the length of time for a program.”*

*“Give more chances.”*

Some of the girls also mentioned practices and processes that need to be changed: “Not having so many court dates; dates always pushed back and just making you wait; “[Court staff] need to be better prepared. I kept having to go to court because they didn’t have it together, waste of time.” Other recommendations for changing current practices included: “Investigate, before sentencing, what is really going on; probation is a setup for failure; “Be able to say goodbye to guardians before leaving for the program from court”; and “Use terms that kids can understand.” Girls also mentioned a need for public defenders who are more helpful: “Pick up phone and talk to [us] more than just five minutes before you go in front of the judge”; and “Wish there was someone to sit down with to talk more, old JPO only ever called if she was going to send me to a program.” In general, girls recommended that public defenders need to offer more support.

## Detention

All girls spent time in secure detention prior to residential program commitment. One in five girls (22%) had filed formal grievances. Issues ranged from girls not receiving their medications, the quality/quantity of food, to staff bothering them and assault by another peer. When asked about their recommendations concerning detention, 31 girls responded with major themes related to the *environment at the detention center*, *the food available*, *cleanliness of the facility*, and *characteristics and behaviors of staff*. In terms of the environment, girls mentioned that the detention center is “too cold” and that they “need more blankets,” that privacy curtains are needed in the showers and that the detention center should have “better beds” and “softer chairs.” Several girls stated that the detention center is dirty or unclean and recommended that this be addressed. Several girls also mentioned that the quality of food is poor or that the amount of food is insufficient. Additional themes emerged regarding physical health, clothing, and a need for consistency/structure while in detention. Girls stated that physical health needs (such as provision of medication) should be met in a timely manner, that they need feminine hygiene products, their own undergarments without holes, and comfortable things to sleep in.

Multiple girls recommended bringing new, friendlier, or “more supportive” staff into the detention center. One girl expressed concerns about the way some staff members at the detention facility talk about repeat offenders. She expressed concern that through this kind of talk, staff members were not honoring confidentiality.

## Probation

Almost all of the girls had been on probation previously (94%). When girls were asked to provide recommendations for improving probation, themes emerged from the 26 girls’ responses around *staff interactions* and *curfew requirements*. In their responses, girls said that staff should “Be more encouraging, want to see girls succeed,” and “... probation officers should try to help kids stay out of trouble.” Girls also stated that they would like to meet with their probation officers more often and have their probation officers be more consistent.

The second theme that emerged regarding probation was related to curfew. Curfew seems to be a point of contention for many girls, who noted that curfew is what “gets a lot of people in trouble.” Of the girls who mentioned curfew,

all of them agreed and recommended that curfew time should be eliminated or pushed back to a later time. One girl stated: “Later curfew, shorter probation. I violated probation a few days before I was going to be released.” Girls brought attention to a lack of consistency and structure of probation. They emphasized the length of probation, the oversight provided, the fairness and severity of probation compared to their offense. The terms of probation sanctions included 7:00 p.m. curfews, attendance at school, and mandatory prohibition of using drugs/alcohol (in some cases, drug testing). Other specific probation requirements, depending on offenses, include: no association with associates / delinquent peers, counseling, anger management class, community service, restitution, and court fees. The reasons for violation of probation were described in the pathways section of this report. Girls had the following recommendations about these aspects of probation sanctions:

*“Realistic terms. Make it step by step. Only so much a kid can do if the parents are unwilling to help.”*

*“People to be more lenient. Probation is a big setup.”*

*“Not as long, I should be able to change where I am living if something happens where I am at.”*

*“Officers need to be consistent. Meet with the officer more.”*

*“Give kids more chances, home detention.”*

*“Investigate parents/people calling to violate rather than believing people right away.”*

*“Have home drug tests where the JPO is present so we don’t have to go far away to do the test.”*

*“Split restitution up fairly among all codefendants. Shorter probation time.”*

## Residential Placement

All girls provided recommendations for improving their residential programs. Girls provided the most recommendations about *staff and practices*, and *food*; a theme regarding *activities and structure* in the programs emerged as well. Some of the responses that mentioned staff are listed below:

*“Needs a lot of changing. More supportive staff, more activities and someone to help the girls.”*

*“Staff – they need to hire staff that is less childish and in it for the youth, not the money. How they treat good kids ... they should be rewarded. Stop rewarding the bad kids.”*

*“... Staff should respect girls and not threaten girls, 1 staff beat up a girl, 1 staff threatened to stab a girl.”*

*“Being able to hold less than 18 girls, better background checks on staff, no males at all, and separate ages.”*

Multiple girls recommended that their respective programs have “more food” and “better food.” One of these girls said she was never full after a meal.

Other responses centered on improving the structure and changing practices, such as:

*“Have organized rules, set release dates, more food.”*

*“Communicate with people outside of your family, better food, pick our own roommates – it would eliminate some drama – and be able to wear some of our own clothes.”*

*“... staff to follow through on promises and grievances.”*

*“More things to do.”*

*“Activities, we just sit here and stare at each other, that’s why there are fights.”*

During the interview, each girl was asked, “What do you need while you are here?”—referring to her needs while in the commitment program. The major themes focused on needing more support from staff:

*“Someone to talk to, need more safety and more counselors.”*

*“Therapy and coping skills.”*

*“Better people that understand me. Adults who don’t act like kids.”*

In addition to support, girls also identified a need for more activities in their programs. Some responses included:

*“Time to get away from other girls and to do art.”*

*“It needs to be more interesting. – Activities and to go outside. Lots of staff here have quit and too much goes on here.”*

*“Music. Good headphones to help block out everything.”*

Many girls also stated that they needed more contact with their loved ones: “Talk to my family more” or “More contact with family, that is all I need.” Other girls noted they would like to “Write to whoever they want” and “... I need freedom to talk to whomever and write to whomever I want.”

While many girls were able to identify needs they have and offered recommendations for how to have those needs met, other girls stated they did not need anything while in their program. Some believed they were receiving the support they needed: “I got the support I needed and have encouragement to do all I need”; “I am doing everything one on one. I am very active on my treatment goals in the program. Getting it done. I have support here.”

## Recommendations for People Who Work with Girls

Girls were asked what they wanted the world to know that would 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 no judgment.

Specific recommendations about listening to girls included the following:

*“Encourage them, they have trauma. Listen to them and know it’s not their fault.”*

*“Everybody does the same thing – they should let girls talk to them. Girls should tell what they need, not adults trying to tell them what they need.”*

*“We need to be heard and not abused.”*

*“We are not all bad, all fast. There is a lot behind the girl you can see and look at. Just because we look a certain way doesn’t mean we are that way. They should read our history or talk to us because that is what they will know. Listen to their story, it will change you.”*

Examples of recommendations about being non-judgmental included:

*“Be there for others, regardless of age, sex, gender, and race. Don’t judge others.”*

*“Let girls share their story, and learn about their lives and story before assuming they are bad kids.”*

*“Don’t judge. Don’t push me, you never know what I am thinking or feeling.”*

*“I am not a bad person, don’t judge us.”*

Girls want the world to understand behaviors within the context of their life experiences, and to recognize that change is a process:

*“Put yourselves in our shoes. You don’t know what we’ve been through. Then you could work better with us.”*

*“Being a teen girl is not easy at all. We’ve been through a lot more than people think we have. We’ve experienced really bad things. We know things we shouldn’t. We want to share it’s not easy being us. Not easy being me.”*

*“Take your time getting to know a girl, let her develop trust, build a relationship with her so she feels safe to open up. Be patient.”*

*“Each girl is different, some heal fast, some don’t. Some understand, some don’t. Some are respectful, some aren’t. It is up to you to have patience to help them. All girls have personal issues.”*

## Discussion and Implications

*Girl-centered research inquiry begins first by listening to girls' narratives and interpreting the data through the lived experiences of girls. We provide the opportunity and the safe space for girls to speak their truth. We hold true that girls are the experts of their own lives. The Policy Center is committed to accurately portraying the voices of girls.*

The narratives shared by girls from the First Coast community highlight their resiliency. When asked to identify challenges or obstacles they have overcome, complex and significant loss and trauma were disclosed. Yet girls also reported having hope for their futures, the desire to return home, and plans for reaching out to their families.

Girls remind us every day through their words and actions that they have hope for their futures, innovative ideas, and clear goals. In the face of multiple challenges and barriers, girls are committed to personal growth, and also through advocacy by recommendations of what needs to change in the system for girls with similar lived experiences. 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 as a result. Girls have provided insight into their daily lives, life histories, their personal strengths, and their most significant challenges.

*"Put yourselves in our shoes. You don't know what we've been through. Then you could work better with us."* Their lived experiences paint a failure of our community and systems to intervene at multiple time points throughout their life. This section summarizes what is happening to girls in our community, with a close look at the resources (services and people) available to address girls' needs. There is an emphasis on exploring the impact of critical gaps in trauma-informed services that drive girls deeper into the system. Critical points for immediate intervention are identified. Policies and practices currently failing our girls are highlighted.

What do you think is the most important thing you've learned in your life that you want to share with younger girls?

*"You can't let the past dictate the future. Don't be afraid to move on to your future. I learned that here, to be honest."*

*"Even though the system has tried to take my family away from me, it doesn't mean you have to give up on your goals and ambitions. Always remember, family is there no matter what. You can always find them."*

*"Keep your head up and stay strong. This isn't the end of your life. It is just the beginning."*

*"You can do anything. Anything is possible."*

*"Life doesn't stop. It's up to you to keep moving and push forward for your future to be successful."*

*"No matter what you have been through, it's your past, but it's your stepping-stone for your future. I've been through everything possible and I'm still overcoming it. You have to want to change."*

*"Make the world, don't let it make you."*

### What's Happening to Girls in Our Community

While there is a positive downward trend in the number of commitments over the last five years, data trends for the region show that Northeast Florida continues to send more girls away than anywhere else in the state of Florida, for offenses that are no more serious than offenses committed in other communities. Additionally, the rate of arrest in



Northeast Florida per 100,000 children is similar (if not lower) than the average statewide arrest rate for girls. Girls are being sent into the system at young ages, the average age of first arrest was 14 years old, with Black girls overrepresenting the youngest arrested. Every girl interviewed had been sent to secure detention at least three times. Some girls were detained despite having no prior offenses. The majority had also been on juvenile probation prior to their incarceration. A deeper look at each girl's "path" into the system via their official records reveals several commonalities: (1) an early misdemeanor charge such as battery or petit theft, leading to possible diversion / 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. This is the common path to deeper juvenile justice system involvement that you "see," but the context for it is what girls have explained.

Multiple systems failed to provide girls with even the most basic form of protections, leading to disconnections. For example, girls rated the education services in the community as not very helpful. The majority were no longer in school, had histories of suspension and expulsion for fighting and/or not attending school. The research shows that early academic failure is a predictor for juvenile justice system involvement, and that schools can be a place to interrupt the "school to prison pipeline." While it is developmentally appropriate that peers become a source of support in middle school, relationships with prosocial peers become critical, particularly since 44% of the girls in our study experienced their first arrest at age 13 or younger. For girls involved in the child protection system, they had numerous group home / foster care placements. When girls became involved in the juvenile justice system, they faced detainment and probation supervision for family and relationship related offenses (not community offenses). The girls did not have serious offenses at the aggregate level (1.5 prior felonies, 2.7 prior misdemeanors), but nevertheless they were committed to moderate- and high-risk residential placements likely because they were high need. For half of the girls in our study, their most serious offense for which they were committed was not for a violent offense, but for a technical violation of probation (VOP). This was true for all girls from Nassau County. This finding raises questions regarding the availability of community-based services to meet needs, especially since the incarcerated population from the First Coast is higher than the statewide population of 28% (DJJ, 2015) and more than double the proportion of girls incarcerated nationally in 2013 for a technical violation (20%) (Sickmund et al., 2015). This trend is consistent with research literature on "bootstrapping" practices that increase the detainment of more girls for status offenses (for example, running away) and technical violations (for example, probation violation for not attending school), offenses that pose no threat to public safety.

Committing girls as a punishment and/or "for their safety and protection" does, however, negatively impact girls' health outcomes as well as their opportunities for gainful employment in the future. The layers of girls' intersectionality: her gender identity, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, and ability also impact girls' paths, responses, and outcomes. **This research data suggests that our community punishes girls for being homeless; for "acting out" in anger as a result of being exposed to sexual violence, neglectful or abusive family situations, or for using survival behaviors; and for nonconformity to traditional gender expectations.** As a response, girls are locked up to get their basic needs met: education, housing, and mental health services. These system failures and individual practices send a message to girls that there are no services left or available to help them in the community, so we must lock them up. Adults have failed girls at multiple time points. As a community, we lock up girls, believing that critical services will be provided. Girls become even more invisible when they are removed from the community. The reality is that the labeling and stigma of involvement in the justice system impacts their future, especially if the issues that contribute to their behaviors are still present in the home and community environment where they will return. Of critical importance is also the concerns of girls who are preparing for transition back to the community, and whether the community has the capacity to meet the needs and provide opportunities to work toward their goals. Girls expressed worries and concerns: fear of being put on probation again, fear of relapse, and fear for their personal safety. These experiences reveal what



must be addressed for girls living and returning to our community, the critical intervention points to prevent detention and incarceration for girls, how to increase access to services and supports, and how to advance the rights and increase opportunities for girls' well-being.

### *Critical Supports for Girls in the Community*

Girls found services such as medical/health, parenting classes, and housing support/shelter available in the community to be helpful. How do we sustain these resources and increase access to them for the most marginalized girls? Participants also said that education and mental health services that were available in their residential programs were helpful (more so than in the community). One explanation is that these services are specialized inside of residential placement and there are fewer barriers to treatment due to the proximity of girls to mental health providers and teachers. It is important that barriers such as transportation, copay, regulations regarding "no show," competing activities, and the number of local providers who are competent to work with trauma survivors in schools and the community are addressed. Further study about individualized education and/or smaller group/classrooms for a specialized population is warranted, as well as further investigation about the components and strategies that build therapeutic alliances with girls that have historically been underserved through mental health services in the community.

Mothers / mother figures were identified as the persons that girls see as their source of support when they leave their residential lockup placement. Girls feel that mothers / mother figures, other female relatives (grandmothers, aunts), siblings, fathers / father figures, friends, therapists, program staff, and probation officers can positively impact girls. Girls identified program staff, therapists, and community workers (in many cases, by name), and most of the girls felt their probation officer had treated them fairly. How can we better support all families, but in particular those involved in the juvenile justice system or those at risk for involvement? How can we encourage more communication between mothers / mother figures and daughters in engaging activities? What does training and support need to look like to let program staff and therapists know of their personal power/influence to positively impact the life trajectory of a girl in crisis? How do we also engage these same people to understand the family relationships and bond between girls and their mother figures? These are critical questions that warrant further exploration, to inform the development of better policies, programs, and services that are directly linked to the experiences of girls.

### *Failures of Community*

This research provides patterns and practices that have negatively impacted girls' trajectories into juvenile justice system involvement. Girls shared narratives of victimization and discrimination, such as being threatened or hurt because of their race and/or gender. Girls' perceived unfair treatment by the officer(s) who arrested them, court staff and attorneys who didn't explain what was happening, and a great number of girls reported that staff had physically restrained them. Many of the girls reported that their parents physically or sexually abused them and that non-family members sexually assaulted them. Girls shared feelings of hurt or being let down by mother figures, father figures, other family members, staff members, and—in some instances—multiple people were identified. One in four girls (25%) said they had "no one to turn to" at some point in their life (whether in elementary, middle, or high school). When girls report victimizations by peers (38%) and teachers (19%), when girls fear being physically attacked or hurt by a staff member in residential placement (9%), when girls believe there is "no one" around to help them, these are indicators of community failure. This information compels us to identify reform initiatives that can effectively address these concerns.

### **Critical Gaps in Services**

A community-based continuum of services can meet the needs of girls. Prevention and early intervention services have been shown to reduce initial contact with the juvenile justice system. Similarly, continuity of care is critical when

receiving effective mental health services; not having access to these services, depending on what “system” you are in, impacts health outcomes. When prevention and early intervention services exist in a local community, they are often underfunded, fragmented, or operate independently, targeting a specific group of children and youth without recognizing the interrelated issues that result in violence and victimization of children (Ravoiira & Patino, 2011).

Girls reported that counseling and substance use services as well as access to community-based organizations would have been helpful, but they were not offered to them. The life experiences shared by girls suggest that a variety of services could have intervened to mitigate stressors girls experienced prior to and during their involvement with the system. These include:

### *Services for Girls Who Are Homeless*

One in four girls who are locked up reported they had experienced homelessness, suggesting an underreported count/prevalence of girls in the community that do not have a place to live. Research suggests that runaway and homeless youth are at risk of exploitation, victimization, and involvement in the juvenile justice system. For their survival, they may be forced to exchange sex for basic needs, including housing or food. Within 48 hours of being on the street, pimps or exploiters will approach or recruit one in three homeless or runaway youth (Hammer, Finkelhor & Sedlak, 2002). Many homeless youth who also experience sexual exploitation identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning (LGBTQ). Many report homelessness as a result of being rejected by their families, leading them to leave home and fend for themselves for survival. Although our sample was small, this research showed comorbidity of homelessness, running away, pregnancy, and sexual exploitation. Services at shelters, safe houses, and drop-in centers are needed.

### *Services for Girls with Trauma and Extensive Loss*

Trauma-informed services that are aligned with girl-centered practices are needed to address the grief and loss that girls in our community are experiencing: death of parent(s) and/or loved ones due to disease, murder, shootings, suicide, car accidents; loss of parents/caregivers due to substance abuse, physical or mental illness, abandonment and/or parental incarceration, as well as loss of their pregnancies due to miscarriages. Services must be developmentally appropriate and girl-centered. Many of our girls reported being the primary caregiver to their families; this relationship component must be a part of the intervention. Further, while a girl is in school, there is a need to ensure communication between service providers, her teachers, and school administrators. If she is in the child welfare system as a result of these traumatic events/losses, there is a need to ensure services are available to her as well as monitoring the effectiveness of group homes, foster placements, and/or extended family placements in addressing girls’ internalizing and externalizing behaviors. Girls need access to someone, or a hotline they can call, in cases when they believe their caseworker, foster parent, or group home is not appropriately and safely serving them. There are opportunities to explore partnerships with hospice services to discuss providing services specifically designed for girls who are traumatized by grief and loss. If a girl gets arrested and placed on probation, how are we ensuring that she has access to appropriate services? In addition, how do we ensure she is not penalized when the therapeutic services are mandated and she is not emotionally ready to address the trauma? How do we also ensure she has a voice in selecting a therapist or agency that will engage in a supportive and nonjudgmental therapeutic relationship with her, and that the therapist or agency meets her where she is at, developmentally?

### *Services for Girls and Families in Crisis*

Half of the girls in our study reported receiving domestic offenses against their family. Families are in crisis. The narratives of girls depict family stressors such as loss of jobs, substance use, and domestic violence that impact the family. There are opportunities to identify families in need through schools, the child welfare system, and the adult and juvenile

justice systems. This includes children of incarcerated parents and children living in domestic violence shelters. We must better understand the root causes for family violence, which often drives the acting-out behaviors seen in schools and in the community.

An extensive body of research supports the effectiveness of both Functional Family Therapy (FFT) and Multisystemic Therapy (MST), models working with juvenile populations with emotional and/or behavioral problems. These models recognize multiple determinants in addressing family conflicts and family histories (such as substance use) that affect girls. For example, MST addresses the environmental factors such as home and family dynamics, school, neighborhoods, and peer influences that contribute to a child's behavior. MST has helped many families in Florida improve relationships, family functioning, school attendance, and reduce substance abuse and traumatic symptoms. This intervention can be especially effective for girls because maintaining ties with families while incarcerated and at the same time working toward positive changes has been shown to foster family reunification and lower recidivism.

Girls consistently report their families as those figures they first turn to for help. Active family participation is needed in the design and implementation of service delivery. Funding to continue these alternative interventions will help girls and families who are in crises in our local community. Additionally, for girls who are pregnant and parenting, they mentioned needing a stable place to live, some want parenting classes, and another would have liked to have completed her education during her pregnancy.

### *Services for Girls Abusing Substances: Prevention and Intervention*

Ninety percent of girls reported using drugs and/or alcohol prior to incarceration. Relapse when returning to the community is a concern shared by many of the girls. Girls reported that substance abuse services available in the community were not helpful—likely because services are not developmentally appropriate and the treatment approach does not follow a cultural, relational, girl-centered framework. Girls report using substances when they feel stressed, and to block out feelings. Substances used included marijuana, molly, cocaine, pain pills, opioids, and alcohol. Girls reported mostly using with older peers and/or alone. This context must be part of the treatment plan and service delivery goals. Research has shown that dual diagnoses of trauma and substance abuse are pathways into the justice system for women and that everything in decisionmaking/coping is in relationship to others. Seeking safety is an evidence-based therapeutic model used to help clients recognize trauma in developing substance abuse intervention plans. Trauma and addiction are addressed in this model, where education of abuse and trauma, its triggers, and related coping skills are critical in addressing the risk of relapse that can be triggered by trauma (Covington, 2008).

### *Services for Increasing Girls' Connection and Safety in Community*

Transitioning back to the community can be a stressful event for girls and their family. This is true for girls who are returning after lockup, after a short stay in detention, after psychiatric hospitalizations, as well as respite care. Girls in this study were worried about relapsing once they return home, a setback in the progress they have made. Other girls identified being worried about their living situation. Either they didn't know where they would be living upon release, or relationships with family caused worry, and other possibilities existed, such as not being able to find employment or not finishing school. The time after lockup is a critical and high-risk period. There are a number of changes that may have taken place in their living arrangements, changes to family structure, peer group, or other life events. There may be periods of emotional and/or psychological distress including feelings of shame, guilt, and anxiety. For girls who used substances to cope, this period of withdrawal presents a challenging time. Attention must be paid to the availability of services and supports for substance abuse and addiction and/or continuity of medication in the community. Girls expressed the need for continuing or finishing their education, employment, housing and transportation—and resources, especially for girls who are parents. Each girl lacked resources to support herself and her child. Girls returning to the

community after being locked up need housing support, access to education, and/or help in navigating their multiple system involvement. As reported by the girls, meaningful services for girls would include opportunities for work / job skill training, engaging with a mentor, receiving individual/family therapy, leadership opportunities, and getting together with other women that have had similar experiences, who are now having success.

It is critical that transition planning and supports are prioritized for girls. Supports must include assisting families with the transition of their daughters back in the homes, and working together in family counseling to address issues of communication, conflict, family trauma, etc. The effects of intergenerational trauma have long-term deleterious effects on girls. Services are needed to help strengthen the families, since girls ranked their mother figures as those they feel most connected to; yet, often, these women have experienced their own adverse life experiences which can affect their ability to support their daughter. Resources to help heal the adult women in their lives are crucial to girls' well-being.

We must also address the barriers to accessing services that may be a result of policies and/or practices not centered on the experiences of girls: location, safety of site, bus access / transportation, time, relevance, staff competency, and the setting/environment where girls are celebrated. Individualized safety plans should be created for each girl that identifies safe places where she can be in the community and safe people she can go to. Transition planning must pay attention to her individualized needs, with specialized considerations for girls who identify as LGBTQ, are pregnant, parenting, and/or have differing abilities.

## Conclusion: What We Can Do to Prevent Juvenile Justice System Involvement

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### Policies and Practices Warranting Attention

There are ways to reverse trends: by keeping girls in our community and responding better to their needs. Shifts in education, child protection, law enforcement practices, as well as immediate alternatives to incarceration, are needed. The following are critical intervention points along the continuum that have an incredible impact in preventing girls' juvenile justice system involvement.

#### *Education Policies and Practices*

Girls are being suspended and expelled, failing school, and are dropping out of school. Girls are reporting negative school experiences which impact their school connectedness. Research shows that building supports at school and preventing victimization/discrimination are key protective factors against juvenile justice involvement and other negative outcomes. In our study, more girls felt supported by teachers while in elementary grade level than in middle or high school. In middle school, more girls reported their peers as a primary source of support. Girls who reported having “no one to turn to” were more likely to report having a negative school experience. Of concern is that girls in this study reported that the educational services received in residential programs were more helpful than their educational services (in the community) before placement. Girls expressed concerns regarding the stigma of going back to school after being locked up, of how hard it is to catch up when you miss school, of not having many options for school, and of wanting to get their GEDs in order to be able to get back on track with their lives. These experiences prompt questions for our community:

- Why are girls on probation not going to school?
- Why are girls failing out of alternative / day treatment models?
- Why are schools pushing out girls when they return to school after being in juvenile detention or when they are committed to a juvenile residential program?
- How can we increase school connectedness and school engagement for the marginalized girls in our community?
- How can we build inclusive school environments?
- How can we balance safe school environments while not disparately employing harsh disciplinary actions that remove students from school?
- How are girls' voices included in addressing and developing educational policies and practices?

Girls thrive when we don't remove them from their schools and communities. There are models to keep girls in school, which provide alternatives to suspension and address the factors that drive their behavior. Some suggested policies and practices include:

- Prevent arrests at schools, handle school violations (for example, disrupting school events, fighting) without juvenile justice involvement.
- Ensure psychological testing and appropriate diagnoses for students when they struggle academically, including not being able to read or write comparable to same-aged peers, being retained, or reporting their schoolwork is too hard for them.
- Provide individualized academic support to students that struggle and do not have family in their life who are

able to assist them with academics.

- Implement specialized interventions for students who are bullied.
- Examine school attendance practices that disparately affect girls living in group homes or foster care.
- Ensure that all children in the juvenile justice and foster care systems have an educational advocate assigned to them so their educational needs, regardless of physical placement, are met.
- Examine school attendance practices and policies, and penalties for girls on probation when they miss school.
- Build inclusive school environments that support and meet the needs of all girls, regardless of their race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identification, socioeconomic status, pregnancy/parenting status, involvement in child welfare and/or juvenile justice systems, family histories, etc.
- Examine how gender-neutral school policies and practices may be negatively impacting girls' connection to school.

### *Child Protection Practices*

Girls involved in the child welfare system in our community reported having had numerous foster care placements, experiencing grief and loss, abandonment and abuse from their parents, and homelessness. In the system that is meant to protect them from further abuse, girls have shared stories of: abuse at the hands of foster parents, problems with investigations on allegations of abuse, and not having a safe space visit or someone to call to talk to about their placement. They also shared concerns about where they will live after their transition from lockup. This concern was pronounced among parenting teens. Seven of the nine girls who had previous child welfare involvement reported no contact with their DCF worker while in their commitment programs. Girls in the child welfare system are at particular risk for incarceration because of the runaway rates, subsequent victimization, and exposure to sexual exploitation that is associated with living and running away from out-of-home placements. These experiences and circumstances raise questions for our community:

- What safeguards are in place to support youth in the child welfare system from the added risks described above?
- What training do child protection workers receive, as well as foster parents and group home staff, to meet the complexity of needs of these youth?
- What investigative practices are in place for girls when they file grievances?
- What is the level of screening and training offered to therapeutic foster parents regarding the needs of girls?
- What is the current policy or practice related to transition, especially living arrangements and custody of children for girls who are parenting?
- What safety plans exist for each girl to meet needs and prevent involvement in the justice system?
- How are girls included in their own goal planning?

Of particular concern are girls who are experiencing homelessness. These girls are at a heightened risk for exploitation, including sex trafficking. The community is lacking a service network for youth who are homeless and living in high-risk situations.

- Have we failed to identify and/or recognize children who are homeless?
- Have we failed to identify victims of sexual exploitation who come in contact with providers and/or systems?
- Additionally, for girls who may be victims of sex trafficking:



- What practices are in place to ensure that we are not locking up victims for “their own protection?”
- What services are available in the community for housing, medical, therapy, legal, and vocational skills?
- How many group homes or safe houses are available for girls who are victims of sex trafficking?

### *Law Enforcement Practices*

Many justice-involved First Coast girls have been victims of or have witnessed domestic violence, suggesting that the practices around domestic violence arrests, especially those involving conflict between siblings, warrants further exploration. One pathway leading girls into the system is an arrest for domestic violence and/or “incorrigibility” made in response to parents who have initiated contact with law enforcement.

What alternatives exist in the community to provide respite and to address family conflict?

The community has domestic violence shelters for women, but, lacking a service network, teen moms or younger girls experiencing domestic violence from parents, other family members, and/or partners, have extremely limited options for / access to help. How often are we using detention because we have no other safe place for girls to go? This lack of options for girls and young women under the age of 18, when there is family conflict and law enforcement involvement, can disproportionately impact girls who are already in the system on probation. Secure placement does not address the underlying problem of victimization and exposure to trauma and, in many cases, can worsen these experiences and add additional layers of victimization and trauma.

### *Alternatives to Incarceration*

Court Practices. Girls reported having limited time to speak with their attorneys and that they did not understand the court process. Girls wanted to be able to share their side of the story, to have an opportunity to explain themselves. A few girls said they pled guilty to a charge but wished they had not. Girls believed their cases were not thoroughly investigated and that their offenses did not warrant incarceration in a residential program.

We know that girls are committed into residential programs for failing to appear in court or for violating the terms of probation.

- What alternatives/safeguards might be put in place so that girls are not set up for failure?

Girls who have a runaway history are not only at risk for the impact of abuse and victimization occurring in the home, but even with limited system contact, that abuse and the expected runaway response jeopardizes their court order requirements and places them at risk for deeper involvement in the system. They will likely end up being committed to a residential facility for violating a court order, but the mitigating circumstances, her victimization or her current exposure to violence, are not taken into account when she does not show up for her disposition. We fail girls when the signs and symptoms of abuse are ignored. This is why this research must be integrated to inform staff training and to inform disposition guidelines that will lead to positive outcomes for girls.

Detention Practices. While in detention, girls filed formal grievances for issues such as: not having access to their medication(s), poor quality food, for the staff harassing them, and for assault by a peer. Such reports from children warrant further investigation of residential safety practices, lengths of stay in detention, and whether secure detention is the appropriate placement. Additionally, the needs and rights of all girls, including youth who identify as LGBTQ, must be supported, and practices that discriminate, isolate, exclude, and/or negatively impact must stop. Training for detention center staff is critical to providing appropriate services for youth who must be placed in secure detention while awaiting court disposition and/or commitment to a program.

Probation Practices. Girls feel that probation is almost designed as a way for them to fail, instead of designed as a source



of structure and support to help them move forward. Probation is a critical alternative to commitment, but it is also a gateway to commitment. In order to prevent girls from deeper system involvement, the following critical interventions should be considered:

- Revisit the caseloads of probation officers with girls, pilot a girls-only caseload to see if the rates of successful completion can improve.
- Provide ongoing training and supports for probation officers regarding probation sanction requirements, available alternatives, and effective strategies for building relationships and safety planning with girls with complex trauma.
- Prioritize opportunities for multidisciplinary staffing before recommending commitment.
- More frequent visits from therapists and case managers.
- Evaluate the length and severity of probation.

## Initiating Positive and Supportive Relationships with Girls at Risk of Juvenile Justice Involvement

### *Girls Want Supportive Staff*

Training on girl-centered practices is key for how to encourage, support, and develop trust with girls across the continuum, including the classroom, in a community program, in a treatment program, in detention, or residential commitment. Girls acknowledge the time it takes to develop a trusting relationship. *“Take your time getting to know a girl, let her develop trust; build a relationship with her so she feels safe to open up. Be patient.”*

There is a need to build more solid relationships/connections in the community. Connectedness to social supports is a protective factor and one that is lacking for our girls. Mothers / mother figures, female mentors, fathers / father figures, therapists, and program staff were among the highest ranked by girls as who can have an impact on the life of a girl, followed by judges, teachers, male mentors, attorneys, coaches, and police officers. Providing staff training focused on increasing girls’ protective factors and mitigating against the risk factors, helps staff see how they can play a role in reducing stressors and increasing coping skills, so that challenges do not lead to feelings of helplessness, despair, exclusion, or other coping strategies that can further criminalize girls. It is critical that the training components include: (1) strategies for supportive and trusting relationships (through the lens and lived experiences of girls); (2) skills to identify warning signs; and (3) strategies to help girls access/navigate assessment and/or treatment.

### **Specialized Training and Interventions Recommended**

**Teachers** – with a focus on increasing the understanding of the impact of community and trauma on the lives of girls, as well as the shifts happening in child development and adolescence and related needs for relationship, connectedness, identity development for girls in elementary, middle, and high school.

**Clinicians** – around the profile and experiences of girls, strategies for building therapeutic alliances.

**Community-based youth-serving providers** – around ways to engage families and, in particular, mothers / mother figures in service delivery, as well as increasing opportunities for female mentors and supports.

**Probation officers and key juvenile justice staff** – around recognizing signs of trauma and ways to improve communication with girls, specifically girls who are high-risk for running away and/or failing to appear in court.

**Attorneys and judges** – around ways to improve the courtroom experience and explaining of information with girls and their families.

**Foster parents and child protective investigators** – around the factors associated with runaways, sexual exploitation, and crossover into the juvenile justice system.

## Opportunities for Investing in Critical Intervention Points (Individual and System)

### *Alternatives to Detention and Commitment*

The Florida Department of Juvenile Justice is moving toward closing beds, and this means that community-based alternatives must be funded. Right now, it appears that residential facilities are where girls from our community are finally accessing services, instead of being able to access them in the First Coast prior to contact with DJJ or commitment. Viable alternatives to detention and commitment will support more girls in their community through a service network that better meets their needs and is more cost effective. The quality and responsiveness of the service to meet girls' needs must be addressed. Further, preventing system involvement or intervening early with quality services impacts girls' futures by increasing their opportunity for gaining employment, improving health outcomes, reducing family disruption, increasing connections, and reducing self-harming or other coping and survival behaviors.

### *Coordination of Services*

In addition to the services being available, **there must be coordination in the First Coast of educational, child welfare, and mental health services, as well as probation, detention, and legal representation services addressing the needs of girls (as identified by the research).** The services must be "relevant" for girls across the continuum. This means that there needs to be safeguards in place, communication/coordination of a service network, and funding to follow the girls. Availability of specialized services for girls who are pregnant and parenting, girls who identify as LGBTQ, are homeless, are victims of sexual exploitation, are victims or suspected victims of sex trafficking, and girls with untreated mental health and substance abuse must be addressed. Additionally, family and transportation barriers to accessing services, and challenges in navigating systems must be integrated in the planning. Further, as the girls have noted, families are the constant source of support at all stages, including transition. Coordination must include and engage families, especially families in crisis or those experiencing domestic violence.

### *Legislation and Policy Shifts That Promote Girls' Health and Well-being*

In addition to services and coordination of a service network, there must be shifts in policy and legislation to support these efforts. Based on this research, policy shifts that could have a major impact on the pathways of girls into the system include:

Addressing the Tools and Policies That May Contribute to a High Number of Commitments for Violations of Probations. In practice, there are opportunities to field test modifications of probation sanctions, particularly around the reasons for which girls violate (for example, girls cite running away and curfew violations as rationales). It is critical to look at models used in other states (for example, Greene County, MO) that have modified sanction tools to ensure that girls understand the contract they are signing, and there are opportunities for girls to communicate and create safety plans with their probation officer. Tools must be normed by gender and ensure that results do not discriminate for girls (negative impact). Other strategies include piloting a disposition matrix to guide decisionmaking (see Missouri model). Some communities have developed alternative graduated responses based on understanding of mitigating circumstances (for example, the reason for breaking curfew), and implemented therapeutic models of probation.

Enacting Legislation Around Privacy of Records. Juvenile arrest records may be accessible by employers, colleges, scholarships, rental communities / credit agencies, etc. Privacy of records for low-level juvenile offenses can lessen the restrictions on opportunities for the future. The girls in this study have strength and resiliency and goals for their future. They are concerned about the impact of incarceration on opportunities when they come home. We can reduce the barriers to getting back on track.

Creating an Ombudsman Position. An ombudsman is charged with ensuring that policies and practices are preventing, intervening, and protecting the future of girls involved in juvenile justice, through the following:

- Identify girls better served in the community in lieu of incarceration.
- Monitor detention and disposition disparities by race/ethnicity and by county. This includes oversight of length of time on probation and days in detention.
- Oversight of girls entering the juvenile justice system who are also part of the child protection system (crossover), and the practices resulting in commitment of girls for technical violations.
- Homelessness of girls.
- Ensure victims of sex trafficking are not being arrested/detained.
- Availability of interventions / fair treatment for youth who identify as LGBTQ.
- Oversight of grievances and complaints by girls / discrimination across the continuum re: safety/fighting in program.
- Oversight of conditions of confinement, including use of restraints in detention and residential programs, and ensuring girls have basic necessities (food, clothing, personal undergarments, hygiene products, medication).
- Ensure alternative placements for girls who are pregnant and/or parenting.
- Convening representatives of education, child welfare, and the juvenile justice system to discuss safety plans, transition supports, and communication with girls and families.

This exploratory study has shed light on the ways many girls have become disconnected from our community. One girl said that all you need is “one person to be there for you, no matter what.” Our community is in crisis because we are missing the mark in meeting the needs of girls who do not have social supports. In the meantime, they are falling through the cracks in schools and in community-based programs, which are not equipped to address the complex traumas and experiences of girls. This report has raised a number of questions that the community must answer. The questions are a helpful guide and provide an opportunity for the policymakers, service providers, citizens, and funders to begin a meaningful dialogue about short- and long-term strategies to transform the response to girls in the community. There are incredible opportunities for action, pilot interventions, sustained programming, deeper research, and immediate policy and practice shifts. Most important, more local champions are needed to be part of the solutions to *break new ground and transform the response to girls in the First Coast community*. The summary graphic, **Impacting the Experiences of Disconnection: Through a Girl-Centered Approach** on the following page elevates the *critical questions* that warrant further exploration to inform the development of better policies, programs, and services that are directly linked to the experience of girls.

## 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
<b>100%</b> of girls had experiences of loss/ trauma & 91% believe mother figures can make a positive difference in a girl's life.	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 lookup.	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.	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?
<b>28%</b> of girls had child welfare system involvement and 69% had lived without parents.	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.	Alternative policies that provide oversight of youth runaway behaviors, victimization in placements, sexual exploitation, and needs of girls in the child welfare system.	What safeguards are in place to support youth in the child welfare system, preventing involvement in the juvenile justice system?
<b>88%</b> of girls had been suspended, mostly for school truancy.	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.	Appropriate educational placements, alternative policies and practices rather than suspension for truancy, girl-centered dropout prevention, and working with students in transition.	How can we increase school connectedness and school engagement for marginalized girls in our community?
<b>91%</b> of girls reported using substances.	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.	Relevant trauma-informed treatment that is developmentally appropriate and follows cultural, relational, girl-centered framework.	How can we connect girls with a gender-appropriate therapeutic model that recognizes trauma and addiction, when developing substance abuse intervention plans?
<b>78%</b> of girls had run away, and 25% were exposed to sexual exploitation.	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.	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.	What service network exists for youth who are homeless and living in high-risk situations?
<b>50%</b> of commitments were for noncriminal offenses (violations of probation).	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.	Community-based alternatives to detention, and residential placement for girls with high needs (including specialized mental health).	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?

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## Appendix

### What pathways and experiences do girls from the First Coast have in common?

Constructs	Interview protocol areas of examination
Extent of juvenile justice involvement	Delinquency offenses and disposition histories (matched from DJJ juvenile justice information system data extract)
Juvenile justice system experiences	Pathways of arrest(s), experiences with law enforcement; experiences with legal system (attorneys, judges); experiences with probation; experiences with juvenile justice residential placement (use of restraint, fear of attack)
Child welfare system involvement	Child protection investigations, foster care placement(s), living somewhere without parents
School experiences	Overall grades, behaviors at school, reasons for suspension(s), discrimination or victimization experiences by teachers, peers, or school policies
Family history	Family offenses, runaway history, caregiving responsibilities, grief/loss of parent/primary caregiver, illness/hospitalization of family members
Substance use histories	Frequency of use, type(s) of substances, with who, and circumstances of use
Identity/discrimination experiences	Perceived discrimination scale based on gender and race/ethnicity

### What services (and people) were most helpful to girls?

Constructs	Interview protocol areas of examination
Services in the community (before placement)	Explained whether medical, mental health, school services, community-based programs, drug or alcohol treatment, housing support, and/or parenting classes were offered and if they were helpful
Services in residential programs (during placement)	Rated whether services in residential programs, such as medical, mental health counseling (individual, family, group); school: alternative education, vocational education; transition planning; drug or alcohol treatment; and/or family planning counseling were helpful to them
Services for reentry (desired after placement)	<p>Meaningfulness and likelihood of use of the following services: website for resources</p> <p>Leadership opportunities; opportunity to get together with other young women/women that have had similar experiences, who are having successes in their lives; work/job skills; opportunity to have a mentor; individual or family therapy; placement to complete community service hours</p>

People that supported them	Identified who they will turn to for help/assistance; identified teachers, mentors, caseworkers, staff, or other adults that supported them during hard times in their life; identified who they went to when they needed help in elementary school, middle school, and high school; and rated the people that they think can make a positive difference in the lives of girls (such as mother/mother figures, female mentors, teachers, staff, judges, etc.)
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What are girls' recommendations for improving the system for girls across the continuum?	
Constructs	Interview protocol areas of examination
Child welfare system (if applicable)	Recommendations for improving the child welfare system (if they had previous involvement for self or their child)
Court processes	Their recommendation(s) for how to improve the court process for themselves and their family
Probation practices	Their recommendations for improving probation
Detention practices	Listing improvements that are needed in the Duval detention facility
Residential programming	Recommendations for improving their residential program
Girls' messages	<p>What they think is the most important thing they've learned in their life who they wanted to share with younger girls</p> <p>What they want the world to know that will help other girls/young women that might experience what they've experienced</p>