

Media contact:

Karen Bonsignori, kbonsignori@iamforkids.org, 727-742-2972

Blythe Zayets, bzayets@seethegirl.org, 904-423-1575

New reports unveil unchecked crisis among Florida girls

Disconnect between current needs and interventions contributes to systemic and youth failures

Tallahassee, Fla. (September 25, 2019) — Although reform for girls in Florida has advanced over the past 10 years with numerous progressive policies and practices, new research by the Delores Barr Weaver Policy Center has uncovered significant rates of violence and victimization among certain segments of girls in their communities, particularly girls of color and those identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual or unsure. Girls living in rural areas also experienced more reports of bullying, less access to a safe parent or teacher and an increased frequency of below average or failing grades. The findings are relevant to resolving chronic failures by child-serving systems and organizations and to address teen substance abuse, sexual and commercial trafficking exploitation, suicide and other poor health and justice outcomes.

“It’s an unchecked crisis because although Florida leaders have access to a multitude of child well-being data, it is often siloed, stated Dr. Lawanda Ravoira, president & CEO of Delores Barr Weaver Policy Center. “This leads to a disconnect between children’s needs and programming and policies that are best aligned to meet those needs.”

According to Ravoira, the two-part *Status of Florida Girls* research reports are the first nationwide to identify Florida’s most vulnerable girls — not just broad trends— by disaggregating a broad spectrum of child well-being data at the intersection of gender, geography and race/ethnicity.

The reports examined educational attainment and disparities, as well as girls’ overall well-being in relation to school connectedness; safety; access to safe adults including parents and teachers; freedom from violence and victimization in their homes, schools, and communities; and emotional well-being. National and state data that were analyzed include those from the U.S. Census Bureau, Center for Disease Control’s Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System, Florida Department of Education, Florida Department of Children and Families, Florida Department of Juvenile Justice, as well as survey data of 27,000 girls in middle and high schools collected by the Florida Department of Health. It was funded by the Florida Women’s Funding Alliance, an affinity group of Florida Philanthropic Network.

Overall, while most Florida girls are faring well, significant numbers are suffering serious traumas and safety compromises:

- One in 10 girls report having been raped, although there are differences by race/ethnicity: 20% of Native Hawaiian, 17% of American Indian/Native American, 9% of White, 9% of Hispanic, 8% of African American and 3 % of Asian girls report forced sexual intercourse experiences.
- Regardless of whether they were in middle or high school, 13% of girls do not feel safe in their neighborhood; one in three do not feel safe in school.

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- Two in three girls in high school reported being verbally bullied (63%); nearly one in three have experienced physical bullying (30%); and one in three have experienced cyber bullying (35%).
- One in five girls (18%) in school (compared to 10% of boys) has seriously contemplated attempting suicide. This rises to one in three girls who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual or unsure of her sexual orientation.
- More than one in three girls experience depression (38%) compared to 18% of their male peers.

According to Ravoira, traumas like these increase girls' likelihood to engage in risky or destructive actions including self-harm, substance abuse, and suicide. When unaddressed, the needs can lead to involvement with child welfare and juvenile justice, two systems of care that struggle to provide timely and appropriate access to a range of important services.

“Every day we see girls with serious unaddressed mental health issues related to violence and victimization who end up locked away in detention centers where their needs are being exacerbated,” stated Vanessa Patino Lydia, vice president of research & planning for Delores Barr Weaver Policy Center and co-author of the *Status of Girls* reports.

“Stories of girls in foster care sleeping in cars at gas stations, experiencing 10, 20 and 30 placements, and being harmed within the treatment system have splashed across the news headlines throughout the past year. The Status of Girls reports are a renewed call to action to move beyond ineffective programs and services and chaotic turnover and turmoil and base policy and services on needs rather than controlling unwanted behavior”, said Roy Miller, president of The Children’s Campaign.

The reports also show there are 12,000 young women ages 16 to 19 in Florida who are not enrolled in school, have not completed high school and are not working. “The irony shouldn’t be lost that although these are perhaps Florida’s most invisible young women, they’re in numbers large enough to fill nearly every seat at the Donald L. Tucker Civic Center in Tallahassee,” noted Ravoira.

About Delores Barr Weaver Policy Center

Established in 2013, the Delores Barr Weaver Policy Center, a not-for-profit 501 (c) 3 is the outgrowth of the Justice for Girls Movement. The mission is to engage communities, organizations, and individuals through quality research, advocacy, training and model programming to advance the rights of girls and young women and youth who identify as female, especially those impacted by the justice system. For more information, visit seethegirl.org.

About The Children’s Campaign

Founded in 1992, The Children’s Campaign is a non-partisan, nonprofit organization that initiates systemic reform for Florida’s children through responsive public education campaigns and responsible public policy. The organization engages diverse citizens, stakeholders and experts in consensus-oriented dialogue, establishes a policy framework with specific recommendations, and then takes action while stressing accountability. The Children’s Campaign in partnership with the Delores Barr Weaver Policy Center, has led the Justice for Girls Movement, which has achieved significant system reforms over the past two decades beneficial to all Florida youth but especially justice-involved girls. More information about The Children’s Campaign is available at iamforkids.org.

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