



Breaking the Cycle: Policies and Practices Creating Barriers that Trap Young Women into Poverty

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About this Project

Breaking the Cycle seeks to identify and address the barriers and obstacles to full participation in education, housing and employment resulting in intergenerational poverty for justice-involved girls, young women, and those who identify as female, living in Northeast Florida. The project expands our capacity to identify and advance innovative policies and practices that remove barriers for justice-involved girls in the areas of court fees, housing and employment, and aligns with our vision to create communities where all girls have opportunities for prosperous and vibrant futures.

The purpose of this brief is to raise awareness of the lived experiences and challenges girls and young women impacted by the justice system face in navigating systems and to improve the response and availability of supports in our community. The information helps us better understand how, where, and why current practices exacerbate gender and racial disparities and create roadblocks to future opportunities.

About the Policy Center

The Delores Barr Weaver Policy Center (Policy Center) is a private not-for-profit organization and an outgrowth of the Justice for Girls Movement that began in Florida more than 20 years ago. With national recognition for its work, the mission of the Policy Center 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. The goal of the Policy Center's girl-centered research inquiry is to ensure that policies, programs, and services are informed by the best available data trends and grounded in the experiences of

girls and young women. The Policy Center partners with girls to provide services and interventions across systems (school, diversion, detention, probation, court, lock-up, re-entry).

Since the Policy Center opened in 2013, the research team has published numerous research reports focusing on girls in the juvenile justice system. The research has led to the Policy Center's ongoing strategic reform planning, the development and implementation of pilot intervention models serving girls, and the passage of fundamental and historic legislation. The Policy Center's community reform model is highlighted in the *Georgetown Journal of Law and Policy* (2013). The research helps communities better understand the issues their girls face, as well as provides a platform to advocate for more resources, changes to policy and/or practice, and create interventions that support girls' health and future opportunities. <https://www.seethegirl.org>

Destiny's Story

At age 15, Destiny sat quietly in the back of the classroom, always polite never causing any trouble. Despite going to school every day, she was failing her classes. No one ever paused to ask her, "how can we help you?" She became invisible.

When Destiny was 16, her mother was diagnosed with a terminal illness. Growing up in poverty with limited access to healthcare, Destiny dropped out of school to take care of her mother. Shortly thereafter her mother passed away. She was placed with her elderly grandmother. In trying to re-engage with her education, Destiny enrolled in an alternative school. A year after her mother died, her grandmother passed away, and she was placed in foster care.

Now seventeen and feeling alone, Destiny began running away from her foster homes. She continued to be invisible. Not feeling like she could trust anyone, she was in a situation where she was forced to take care of herself. After struggling in her alternative school for so long, she dropped out and began applying for jobs at fast food restaurants.

Destiny would ride the bus for hours to get to work. Despite trying her best, without reliable transportation she was inevitably late and always fired. On the brink of aging out of the foster care system, Destiny did not know what was coming next.

Destiny found herself completely alone when she turned 18. Having dropped out of school and having no support systems, it made it impossible to get a job. She had lost everything and became homeless.

Why was Destiny struggling so much academically? Where were her supports in the education and child welfare system? Destiny, like other young women, became invisible after she dropped out of school.

“Poverty is the barrier to escaping poverty”

Nicole Mason, Born Bright

Girls and Young Women Living in Poverty

Florida Kids Count (2016) reports that Florida’s population ranks as the third fastest growing in the U.S. with one in five being a child under the age of eighteen. In 2017, approximately one in five children in Florida are growing up in poverty (US Census). According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2017), the estimated percentage of families living below poverty level was 13% in Duval County, 12% in Baker County, 9% in Nassau County, 8% in Clay County, and 6% in St. Johns County.

Children who grow up in poverty have lower educational attainment, have lower lifetime earnings, are more likely to receive public assistance, and experience poorer health compared to their peers (Coley & Baker, 2013).

The Policy Center’s Status of Girls statewide research series¹ uncovered an invisible group of girls who are falling further behind in our communities and are at risk for the outcomes associated with poverty. According to Census data, there are an estimated 12,000 girls in Florida who are not enrolled in school, have not graduated from high school and are not working. In Duval County, in 2015, there were 1,080 females ages 16-19 who were not enrolled in school and had not received their high school diploma, 70 percent were not working/in the labor force (Patino Lydia, Sanders & Ravoira, 2019). Disconnected youth are more likely to live in poverty, be disabled, drop out of school, have children, and be institutionalized (Lewis & Gluskin, 2018).

The *Status of Women in Florida by County: Poverty and Opportunity Report* (2016) shows that Florida scores in the bottom third in the United States for percentage of women with a bachelor’s degree or higher (27%). Educational progress has not been distributed equally among racial and ethnic groups and an increasing proportion of women continue living in poverty in Florida (Anderson & Hess, 2016). Further, women who are involved in the criminal justice system are the most marginalized (poorest members of society) which means the barriers to housing, educational opportunities, and employment impact them the hardest (Sawyer, 2018). Maintaining the status quo is detrimental to girls and young women’s health and well-being, educational outcomes and long-term earning potential. It is also detrimental to the welfare of our local communities, state and, the next generation.

In 2017-18, there were 403 girls arrested, 167 girls on probation, and 30 girls in lock-up who returned to our local community (DJJ, 2018). In 2017, there were 2,459 young women ages 16-24 admitted to adult lock-up in Duval County. The majority of clients served in 2018-19 by the Policy Center who are living in Florida’s First Coast (Duval, Baker, Clay, Nassau, St. Johns Counties) (n=268), fall under Health Zone 1 or Health Zone 4 (78%).

¹ Status of Girls in Florida: Educational Attainment and Disparities by County (2019); Status of Girls Well-Being in Florida (2019).

Residents of these health zones experience the lowest household income, the highest poverty and infant mortality, and the highest rate of unemployment of the zones. One in two young women ages 16-25 who participate in groups facilitated by the Policy Center biweekly at the John E. Goode Pre-trial Detention Facility/Duval County Jail have children (49%) and one in four did not graduate high school (25%). In 2018-19, there were 88 victims of sex trafficking who received services through the Policy Center's Open Doors Outreach Network locally.

What We Have Learned

The Policy Center has been monitoring the experiences of system-involved girls by listening and focusing attention through various ways: direct contact with girls who are navigating systems and experiencing barriers, collecting information from staff working with girls, participating in community meetings, reviewing policies, statutes, talking with experts in the field, and monitoring the data trends. Based on this, we have learned of the archaic, unfair, and restrictive policies/practices that keep young women and their children trapped in an intergenerational cycle of poverty. With the release of multiple research studies examining educational attainment, well-being indicators, impact of court costs, and unnecessary use of secure detention, we have found that the effects of not having a stable home is at the intersection of all of these issues. For our most marginalized girls and young women, the experience of housing instability increases vulnerability to school dropout, homelessness, exploitation, and system involvement.

Cycle of Poverty

The challenges that girls and young women impacted by justice system face (e.g., arrest records, court fees) buries them deeper into poverty, and limits their options for obtaining success for themselves or their families. With a lack of viable alternatives, women are often forced into activities (e.g., trespass, forging checks, petit theft, drug use) that result in continuously cycling in and out of the system. The majority of girls and young women are in the system for offenses (offenses related to coping and/or survival). With a criminal record that is accessible to employers, access to any job is challenging (and eligibility for a job that pays a living wage is almost non-existent). Further, a felony record bars women from public assistance, public housing, and certain licenses for employment (cosmetology, child care, teaching, nursing, bank teller, etc.). If



Vicious Cycle that Keeps Women Trapped in Life of Poverty

Housing is Critical: Homelessness and housing instability impacts educational outcomes. Education impacts employment opportunities. Formerly incarcerated people returning to the community without stable housing in place are twice as likely to recidivate (Weiss, 2016). Previous incarceration makes it 13 times more likely to experience homelessness (Couloute, 2018).

you had children at the time of arrest and they were placed in foster care, to get them back you need stable housing (requiring consistent income). The lack of access to a safe, stable, and affordable home impacts every aspect of an individual's life including the basic ability to participate in educational opportunities and secure and sustain employment.

Reframing: Housing First

There is a vicious cycle that affects how access to education and employment that pays a living wage impacts the ability to secure housing and how the lack of housing impacts the ability to sustain employment or engage in educational opportunities. Each of these basic needs impact each other—and it becomes a vicious cycle that keeps women trapped in a life of poverty. Destiny's experience of not having a stable home made it impossible for her to sustain employment. This further exacerbated her ability to have a stable home. The insurmountable barriers that Destiny faced, including a criminal record, could put her, and girls like her, in a never-ending cycle of poverty.

By understanding the real life experiences and differences among girls as it relates to education/employment, and housing that keep them and their children trapped in an intergenerational cycle of poverty, we are better equipped to develop efforts to intervene and improve health and future opportunities. We can begin by understanding the interplay between how housing influences every aspect of our health in terms of stability, quality, and the effect on physical and mental health (Koh & Restuccia, 2018). Our long-term well-being is inextricably tied to where we live. Having access to a safe, stable home is fundamental to the future success of girls and young women. It sets the stage for better educational and employment outcomes that are essential for breaking the cycle of poverty.

Yet, for many girls and young women access to a stable home is denied due to policies around access to previous eviction history, criminal justice system involvement, and/or sex offender registry laws. We can predict the long-term consequences that lead to school failure and unemployment if we do not shift the current policies and practices.

It does not matter what services may be in place until there is a safe home to live. Until someone has a safe place to live, they will not move out of poverty. Following is a sampling of policy issues that impact housing or that threaten loss of housing:

System Involvement is Expensive and Deepens Poverty Re-entry Barriers Girls and Young Women Face with a Record:

Policy Issue	What is it?	Impact on Girls	What it means in the life of a girl
Cost of care fees	Families are charged \$1/per day for probation and \$5/day for residential lock-up. For a 9-month lock-up stay, this could cost \$1,368.	Stress on families who are already experiencing hardships can result in increased tensions between adult/girl in the household.	Can exacerbate existing fragile adult/child relationships in the home that further alienate parent/caregiver and child
Court fees	Court cost fees are costs imposed on juveniles and their families. Costs are related to probation/supervision, informal adjustment/diversion, evaluation/testing, cost of care, fines, expungement costs, and restitution. Can range from \$100 to thousands of dollars. The application of court fees and amounts can vary based on the prosecutor, the sitting judge and geography.	Exacerbate poverty, increase surveillance, and widen racial disparities. ²	Until fees are paid/resolved, driver's license is suspended. Driving with a suspended license can result in additional charges including violation of probation and deeper system involvement. Unpaid fees can also impact lines of credit.
Sex offender registry law (applied to some victims of sex trafficking)	The sex offender registry legislation requires that the name is public record.	Concerns for the safety and privacy of victims from traffickers and others when their name is public record. The registry also impacts the eligibility for housing and gainful employment.	Restricts residency, employment, educational opportunities, decreased privacy, long-term stigma.
Access to Emergency Housing	Lack of space in shelter facilities and domestic violence centers. The population of girls and women that we serve are at an additional disadvantage where they have almost no shelter options. Policies and practices do not allow them to be admitted, or even placed on waiting lists. For runaway and trafficked minors need a parent or a case worker to be enrolled, and this is often not an option. Additionally, other shelter options that are used by facilities, such as hotel stays, further traumatizes trafficked victims.	Girls can end up in secure detention because shelter refuses respite beds (e.g., youth enrolled before, history of violence, zoning issue, foster care, sex offense).	Exacerbates/re-traumatizes, interrupts education, employment, etc.
Access to Long-term Housing	Individuals that have been incarcerated or convicted of a crime are not protected from discrimination in the housing industry. Women are barred from public housing if they have a previous eviction or have been justice involved within the last five years.	Screen for 1) criminal history in past five years 2) credit as relates to rental history including evictions 3) references from past landlords	No housing for individuals that are 17 years old even if they have been on their own for a long time and are capable of self-care.

² Children living in poverty pay higher fees because they have a longer involvement with the system due to their inability to pay. Due to the fact that there is already an overrepresentation of youth of color in the system, the costs associated with outstanding fees or not paying further impacts youth of color the most.

Moving Forward

Our challenge is to interrupt this path and create ways to help women. This takes policy interventions, practice changes, and shifts in programming that address criminal justice system, housing, employment and education disparities.

Raise Awareness: Engage leaders in community dialogue to raise awareness of the barriers and reframe the challenge of addressing housing as a fundamental issue of well-being to break the cycles of poverty and potential justice system involvement

Engage Housing Experts: Continue dialogue with housing experts on the First Coast to look at Housing First approach and partner on initiatives to bring forth supportive housing models that shifts the dialogue from” temporary shelter” and housing “placements” to stable “homes” for girls and young women.

Convene Legal Experts: Continue dialogue with legal experts about the sex offender legislation, its intent and use as well as what needs to change to reduce the impact on victims of sex trafficking regarding access to housing and employment. Similarly, dialogue with legal experts about eliminating court costs and fines and implementing alternatives for people who do not have the ability to pay.

Facilitate Community briefings: Engage citizen leaders to discuss issues and recommendations specific to local communities.

Blueprint for Action: As a result of our research findings and discussions, we are expanding the focus of the Justice for Girls Blueprint for Action 2020 to include specific strategies to address the experiences of girls and young women in their communities, schools, and homes which impact their well-being. The goal is to build policy and programs grounded in strategies that break the cycle of poverty for vulnerable girls and young women who are in margins. This includes girls who drop out, in/out of home placement, aging out of foster care, girls returning from lock-up, and victims of sex trafficking who need safe harbor placements.

Link to Research Reports: www.seethegirl.org/what-we-do/research/

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