



Justice for Girls Blueprint:

The Way Forward for Florida

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY, JULY 2022

DELORES BARR WEAVER ———
POLICY CENTER
————— SEE THE GIRL®

“I strongly believe research is the primary building block in strategic philanthropy. Once you know the need, you are on your way.”

— Joan Amery Van Vleck

The *Justice for Girls Blueprint for Action 2022* and Report Card will be issued every five years and will be fully funded in perpetuity by the Joan A. Van Vleck Justice for Girls Endowment. The permanent Designated Endowment Fund is held at The Community Foundation for Northeast Florida. Joan Van Vleck’s gift is her enduring commitment to the power of having thoughtful, timely research on which to base advocacy for better policies and practices to benefit girls.

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About the Policy Center and American Children's Campaign

As a result of our dynamic partnership, groundbreaking legislation is now in place in Florida to address the disparate treatment of girls. Together, we have developed best-practice, girl-centered programs that are being replicated statewide and nationally.

The Policy Center's multifaceted research is central to its successful advocacy and programming initiatives. To monitor and deeply understand the experiences of justice-involved girls in Florida, the Policy Center research team conducts in-depth interviews and focus groups with girls in the community, in detention, on probation, and in juvenile jails. Additionally, through focus groups, surveys, community briefings, and one-to-one meetings, the research team collects information from both staff and stakeholders who interact with girls—sheriff, state attorney, public defender, juvenile justice, education, child protection, behavioral health, service providers, families, and caregivers. The team routinely monitors data trends, collaborates with experts, and reviews existing policies, statutes, processes, and proposed legislation to assess the potential impact on girls. The research considers differences by gender, race, ethnicity, age, and region.



Established in 2013, the Delores Barr Weaver Policy Center is an outgrowth of the Justice for Girls Reform Movement in the State of Florida. The Policy Center's 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.** The Center's core services are grounded in rigorous research with justice-involved girls, which informs the advocacy platform, the Girl-Centered Practice Training Institute®, and the development and implementation of Girl Matters® direct service model programs across the justice continuum (prevention, diversion, intervention in elementary and middle schools, in court, detention, pre-trial adult jail, probation, and re-entry services).



Established in 1992, American Children's Campaign's mission is to be the change for complex social problems through education, advocacy, and community activism. In service to this mission, the organization has earned a sterling reputation of its results-oriented, leading-edge advocacy to improve the well-being of children. American Children's Campaign works to educate and engage diverse citizens, stakeholders, and experts in a non-partisan way to initiate strategic change for Florida's children and families.

www.seethegirl.org

www.seethegirl.org/research

www.iamforkids.org

For a history of the Justice for Girls movement visit:
<https://www.seethegirl.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/The-Justice-for-Girls-Movement.pdf>



Executive Summary

Alarming numbers of girls in Florida are experiencing sexual victimization, interpersonal violence, unaddressed mental health issues, homelessness, and involvement in the juvenile justice system. Perhaps most shocking, in Florida, police have arrested girls as young as six years old. *The Justice for Girls Blueprint: The Way Forward for Florida (2022)* is a renewed call to action that addresses the unfinished reforms identified in the first Blueprint published in 2008 and identifies where reforms are urgently needed now. The strategies included in the report outline the way forward to create a healing community system of care for girls in Florida. The Delores Barr Weaver Policy Center’s extensive research coupled with girls’ voices, lived experiences, and wisdom informs every aspect of the reforms outlined in this Blueprint. Lasting change starts with enacting policies that dismantle systemic disparities for girls and replace them with sustainable and forward-thinking methods—now and for generations to come.

The Justice for Girls Movement has achieved significant reforms—ranging from expanding the juvenile justice statutes to mandating gender-specific programming, banning shackling of girls during childbirth, expanding confidentiality laws and expunction of juvenile records, to passing safe harbor laws to protect the rights of sex trafficking survivors. We also applaud the significant reduction in arrest, detention, and lockup of girls over the last decade. Yet this is not enough to ensure the well-being of girls in our state. There is still much to accomplish.

From 2005 to 2007, over 125 diverse Florida stakeholders partnered with justice-involved girls, and reached consensus on the fundamental rights of girls. These served as the basis for the recommendations set forth in the initial *Justice for Girls: Blueprint for Action (2008)*. Girls have a fundamental right to:

- **Fair and equitable treatment,**
- **Freedom from violence and exploitation,**
- **Be valued and respected by those who interact with them,**
- **Be able to trust the system,**
- **A system advocate.**

Despite our successes, we have failed to safeguard these rights for thousands of Florida girls. The needs of girls continue to show that we must do more to ensure their well-being. Community-based services and alternatives to incarceration continue to be limited.

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."

— Girl incarcerated in residential program

The Policy Center's Status of Girls research series (2019–21) highlights the intensive needs of girls in every county across Florida. The research further emphasized troubling facts about girls' safety and well-being. **Approximately one in ten girls report being a victim of rape, and one in three girls report that they do not feel safe in school with wide variation by race/ethnicity and by region.** Girls in middle and high school across the state are experiencing high rates of sadness, hopelessness, depression, and suicide ideation.

This research called out the several populations of girls who warranted priority attention based on indicators of well-being: girls of color, lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or girls unsure of their sexual identities, girls with differing abilities (developmental delays), and survivors of sexual violence, exploitation and/or trafficking. Additional research revealed concerning statistics about Black girls specifically, as they are overrepresented in arrest and incarceration (based on their proportion of the general population across 15 counties). Over 3,000 youth are identified yearly as potential victims of sex trafficking.

It is critical for decision makers to understand how girls' exposure to trauma and violence impacts their behaviors and results in juvenile justice system involvement. Too often, instead of addressing the trauma that is paving the pathway into the justice system, the system's punitive and uninformed response causes further harm and derails girls' futures.

A girl-centered approach called for in this Blueprint ensures that girls' lived experiences (of safety, interactions/treatment by adults, traumatic experiences) guide policy, services, and interventions in strong partnership with decision makers, stakeholders, and communities.

Policies, services, and interventions deliberately developed and implemented through a **girl-centered lens within all systems (education, mental health, child protection, courts, justice) can positively alter the trajectory of a girl's life.**

This approach shifts the focus from responses that blame or penalize to responses that build connection and address the root causes that are driving girls' behaviors.

Improving the lives and outcomes for the most vulnerable girls has a positive ripple effect that expands far beyond girls and their families. Through policy and practice reform to divert girls from justice system involvement we save the state money, we prevent harm to future generations, and we improve the social environment for all youth.

Elected officials, decision makers, and citizens have the opportunity to support and pass bold policies and invest in a continuum of care that responds to what girls truly need.

BLUEPRINT STRATEGIES

Strategy 1: **Stop the entry into the justice system.**

Enact legislation to immediately reduce the numbers of girls entering the justice system and divert them to more appropriate and effective programs. We already know these include prevention, early intervention, improvements in civil citation and more diversion. Specifically, we call for:

- Ban arresting girls age 12 and younger unless for violent offenses. We call for expanding the Kaia Rolle Act to include youth up to the age of 12. The current law protects children up to age 7.
- Ban arresting girls for family disturbances; support and help them through child welfare and community services instead of law enforcement interventions.
- Stop arresting girls eligible for a civil citation and ensure equal access to alternatives.

Strategy 2: **Stop institutional traumatizing of girls - overhaul conditions of confinement**

- Reform practices in detention, probation and court to stop the cycling in/out of the system (e.g. ban violating and detaining girls for domestic disturbances, not going to school, etc.)
- Fourteen states have created an independent ombudsperson position; this is needed in Florida to oversee abuses, conditions of confinement and advocate for girls' rights and protections.

Strategy 3: **Continuously monitor data; build levels of community accountability and attention to girls' needs.**

- Utilize existing committees and workgroups (e.g., State Advisory Group (SAG), Children and Youth Cabinet, Circuit Advisory Boards) to collect data, examine data by gender and race/ethnicity, report on regional needs for interventions and programming, and advocate for girls' rights and protections.

Strategy 4: **Mandate training and girl-centered standards.**

Educate and train practitioners, court personnel, police, and the broader community.

- Support and train the staff that work with girls in girl-centered, trauma-informed practice.
- Mandate that Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ) and Department of Children and Families (DCF) implement a Gender-Responsive Certification Program as part of the required training courses.

Strategy 5: **Fund specific and essential girl-centered services.**

Allocate recurring funding specific to an essential set of girl-centered services; allocate funds for prevention, early intervention, intervention, intensive intervention, out-of-home treatment, and community reintegration.

- Earmark recurring state funding for the development, implementation, and evaluation of community-based, girl-centered prevention, intervention, and re-entry programs and services.
- Pilot programs that specifically address the needs of girls of color, girls from rural areas, LGBTQ girls, victims of sex trafficking, girls with differing abilities (developmental delays), and girls experiencing family disturbances.
- Require DJJ and DCF to develop gender-responsive program standards in all contracts and quality assurance standards.
- Employ known solutions such as counseling, respite, substance abuse treatment and mentoring from a girl-centered lens.



Girls are counting on us to turn our knowledge into ACTION.



We envision communities where ALL girls have alternatives to lock up, a community where ALL girls are safe, valued, and celebrated.

