

Making a Difference

When it comes to teens in trouble, girls need a place of their own.

BY ANNE TEIGEN
AND SARAH ALICE BROWN

The good news about juvenile crime is that the overall rate has declined in recent years. The bad news is that girls now are the fastest growing segment of the juvenile justice system.

Some states have seen an alarming increase. California's Alameda County, for example, had a 44.5 percent increase in the number of young women entering its juvenile justice system between 1998 and 2007, and a 49 percent increase in the number of girls who were in the system for nonviolent offenses, such as theft and truancy.

Of the 1.5 million young people under age 18 arrested in 1998, 27 percent were girls. By 2007, they were 29 percent of the 1.2 million arrested. Girls now represent 15 percent of those held in juvenile facilities and as much as 34 percent in some states.

Girls Are Different

More so than boys, girls in trouble have a disturbing history of emotional, physical and sexual abuse. Estimates are that, of incarcerated girls, more than 78 percent have been abused, up to 70 percent have a mental health disorder, and many are pregnant or will become pregnant. Girls, more often than not, enter the juvenile justice system because they are running away from violence or abuse.

"Girls are [arrested] for lesser offenses than boys, are often younger than boys and are three times more likely to have been a victim of sexual abuse," Leslie Acoca, executive director of the National Girls' Health and Justice Institute. Most female juvenile offenders get in trouble between 14 and 16 years of age.

Acoca's research found less at-risk behavior and delinquency in girls who were in good health. In fact, her National Girls Health Screen project discovered girls who received health care in the juvenile justice system were 72 percent less likely to reoffend. And those who received mental health services were 40 percent less likely to reoffend.

Anne Teigen tracks juvenile justice issues for NCSL. Sarah Brown is a program director for NCSL's Criminal Justice program and specializes in juvenile justice issues.

Lawmakers Look at Changes

Girls traditionally have been placed in facilities and programs designed for boys, where the emphasis is on security over prevention and treatment. Girls tend to have more serious issues and are held longer in detention than boys.

About 93,000 young people are in juvenile justice facilities across the country, according to the Justice Policy Institute. Seventy percent of them are in state-funded residential facilities. With an average cost per child of \$241 a day, states collectively spend about \$5.7 billion a year on imprisoning juveniles.

Several states are trying to move away from expensive state institutions into more effective community-based services, which can provide a better continuum of care for girls.

Over the last 10 years, lawmakers in Connecticut, Florida, Hawaii, Minnesota and Oregon have enacted laws that require treatment that is specific to girls' needs. The laws generally require programs geared toward girls and boys that help with the prevention, treatment and rehabilitation needs of young people served by juvenile justice systems.

In 2010, New Mexico lawmakers passed a measure asking the Department of Children, Youth, and Families to develop a plan for gender-responsive services and programs for girls. The few existing programs just for girls usually address issues such as pregnancy, substance abuse or gang involvement.

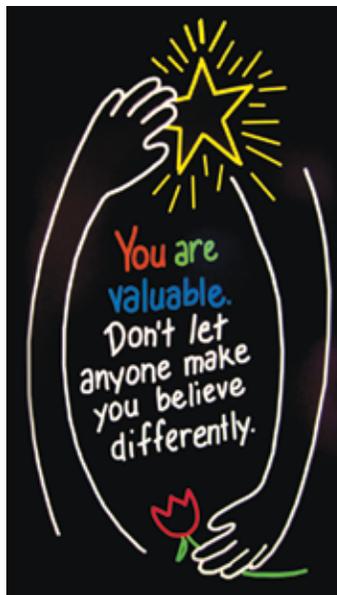
The programs, however, often fail to address the many problems most at-risk girls face—physical abuse, drug use, suicidal thoughts and academic problems.

In 2006, Hawaii passed a law directing the Office of Youth Services to collaborate with the human services, health, labor, and education departments to develop a comprehensive care program for girls in the juvenile justice system.

Florida's Experience

Florida has been a leader in developing programs specifically for girls. In 2004, lawmakers decided to revamp their juvenile justice programs to make sure girls were being treated appropriately and teamed up with the PACE Center for Girls. PACE, founded in 1984, is a nonprofit prevention program for at-risk adolescent girls that operates 17 centers throughout Florida. It receive about three-quarters of its funding from the Department of Juvenile Justice and local school boards. Girls are referred to the program from a variety of agencies.

The girls at PACE—which stands for Practical Academic





Cultural Education—have had traumatic lives. Many have failed in school, have been victims of physical or sexual abuse, and many have been arrested. The centers provide comprehensive services aimed at helping girls avoid delinquency and stay out of the juvenile justice system.

Teachers and counselors provide an array of programs—academic classes, group therapy, counseling, a life skills course aimed at girls, student volunteer projects, follow-up transition services—that include individual attention and parental involvement.

“PACE is recognized as the most effective program in the nation for keeping adolescent girls out of the juvenile justice system,” says Mary Marx, president and chief executive of the organization. “Its purpose is to intervene and prevent school withdrawal, juvenile delinquency, teen pregnancy, substance abuse and welfare dependency in a safe and nurturing environment.”

Lawmakers Visit

NCSL took a group of 15 legislators from across the country to visit a PACE Center in Orange County, Fla., in November 2011 through its partnership with the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation,

Girls in the program led tours, told their stories and answered questions from the lawmakers.

“I was very impressed. It is such a new, open concept to be working specifically with girls, which removes a lot of the pressures that adolescents have with peer relationships,” says Kansas Representative Janice Pauls (D). “I was pleased to hear the girls speak positively about the counseling services provided to each of them to help them overcome past and present hardships.”

Individual Focus

Girls are placed in classes of 10 to 12, small enough so everyone receives individual attention.

Every girl sets individual education and social goals that are focused on earning a high school diploma or GED, re-entering public school, attending college, obtaining vocational training, joining the military or entering the private workforce.

“You could see such growth in the girls based on their recitations to us—from the hard places they had come from to where they are now,” says Nebraska Senator Brenda Council (NP). “You could see in each and every girl how positively they responded to the services provided.”

After girls graduate, center staff continue to monitor and support each girl’s educational and personal development for three years by keeping in touch with the girls and their families. PACE staff track recidivism, school attendance and employment. In 2011, the center reported that, over a three-year period, only 5 percent of girls were in trouble with the law again after they completed the program.

The organization plans to expand to other states. Georgia Senator John Crosby (R) hopes to see similar programming in his state. “The good news is PACE may come to my state to help serve our girls in Georgia,” he says. “What a wonderful opportunity it was to visit and hear the first-hand success stories of these young ladies. I have a lot of ammunition to take home.”

As more states explore programs geared specifically toward girls, Acoca suggests creating a commission to study the needs of girls in each state and collaborating with organizations that have experience in the issue.

This type of approach “can be most effective if policies are based on current, real and individualized needs of girls, along with proper medical and psychological treatment,” Acoca says. “This can curb the tide of the rising female juvenile population.”



Senator
Brenda
Council (NP)
Nebraska



Representative
Janice Pauls (D)
Kansas



Senator
John Crosby (R)
Georgia

SL ONLINE

Learn more about juvenile justice issues at www.ncsl.org/magazine.

Life

CHANGING



BY ANNE TEIGEN

Cierrah is like a lot of 16-year-old girls. She's quick to giggle, loves dancing and hip-hop, and is a self-described "social butterfly." She looks forward to teen nights at local dance clubs with her friends. When she graduates from high school next year—she's earning As and Bs— she wants to go to cosmetology school, and then work styling hair and doing make-up.

In many ways, her future is full of promise. Yet her past was full of pain. Cierrah, like many of the young women at the 17 locations operated by the PACE Center for Girls in Florida, has lived a life marked by tragedy.

"I never met my real dad, so I don't know what he even looks like," she says.

When she was 5, her mother married a man who beat her and a younger brother and sister.

"My mom left him for about a year but he found us," she says. "He came to our trailer and found my mom with her new boyfriend, who was black, and my stepdad was racist. Before I knew it, gunshots were fired."

No one was hurt, and Cierrah's mom ended up back with the stepfather. A year later, he died of a heart attack. Soon her mom was working late shifts at a bar, and Cierrah was left to care for her brother and sister.

"It didn't really bother me, though, because I had been doing that since I was 7," she says.

Cierrah made it through the eighth grade with Cs and Ds but barely passed ninth grade after missing 32 days of school. "I stayed at home with my mom a lot of times so I could spend time with her," she says. "I never told her I smoked weed or had

sex, but I think she probably knew. We were very close, best friends."

Five days after Cierrah turned 16, a police officer came to the door with news of another tragic turn in her family's life. Her mother and her boyfriend had been out drinking the night before and were killed in a drunken driving crash. Cierrah had to identify her mother by her ankle tattoo; she and her mom had matching tattoos.

Cierrah and her siblings went to live with the parents of a close friend. Soon after, she was caught for truancy. When she was offered an opportunity to attend the PACE Center in Orlando, she decided it was her best chance to avoid ending up in more trouble or jail.

More than 21,000 Florida girls have attended PACE schools since the program was founded in 1983. It's recognized as a national prevention model for girls by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Children's Defense Fund, National Mental Health Association, the National Council on Crime and Delinquency and the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

One of the great features of PACE, Cierrah says, is the availability of counselors. They're always there to talk with the girls. She also likes the small class sizes.

While Cierrah has her heart set on cosmetology, she also sees community service in her future.

"I'm looking for ways to speak at AA meetings to help other alcoholics, like my mom," she says. "I want to let them know that what they do impacts others, but they can overcome it."

Cierrah often feels she has the world on her shoulders and doesn't want to let anyone down. "Especially my siblings, I can't let them down," she says. "I'm like their mom now."

But since attending PACE, she knows she doesn't have to take on the world by herself.

"There are days I want to give up but I don't, because I know I have a family at home and a family at PACE that cares for me and that's what that keeps me going." 