



# FIGHT FOR OUR GIRLS

APPLYING AN INTERSECTIONAL LENS TO GIRLS OF  
COLOR FACING STATUS OFFENSES

**T**he child welfare and juvenile justice systems each strive to ensure that youth are safe and have opportunities to develop and succeed. Yet historically, both systems have struggled to meet the unique needs of girls of color and have sometimes undermined, rather than facilitated their ability to thrive.

Youth of color are often re-traumatized by the very systems meant to help them and as a result can experience a continuum of negative outcomes. When race is combined with gender, sexual orientation, gender identity and other marginalized identities, the potential for poor outcomes stemming from system involvement can be exacerbated.

Girls of color who commit status offenses – behaviors like running away, missing school and violating curfew – are often seen and defined as social problems requiring intervention at the individual level. However, this classification ignores the structural inequities and trauma contributing to their behaviors. This brief challenges the sole focus on the individual by examining the historical biases that exist within our child-serving systems. It also explores how the intersection of race and gender continues to negatively define outcomes for girls of color. Finally, the brief makes recommendations for policy and practice changes in public systems that are trauma-informed and promote healing and well-being.

In order to ensure that child welfare and juvenile justice systems are able to successfully serve the needs of all youth, we must focus on those who are most often marginalized. We must shift the prevailing narrative around girls of color

from one rooted in stereotypes, structural oppression and implicit bias to one that promotes healing and resiliency. We must fight for our girls.

While our analysis centers on the experiences of cisgender girls, the gender identity of transgender girls should be recognized and affirmed, especially when interacting with public systems meant to promote well-being.<sup>1</sup> However, research and data collected by public systems often fail to capture the experiences of transgender and gender non-binary youth.<sup>2</sup> The need to fight for our girls goes beyond the struggles of cisgender girls and includes those who identify as femmes, transgender, two-spirit and gender non-binary.



GIRLS OF COLOR,

Photo: Richard Ross

# Status Offenses and Intervening PUBLIC SYSTEMS

Status offenses are seldom the result of a single act of defiance, but instead are often caused by underlying societal and interpersonal trauma.<sup>3</sup> Even worse, they can be an early stop on the pipeline between the child welfare and juvenile justice system, especially for girls facing commercial sexual exploitation and those placed in congregate care and residential treatment facilities.

The federal Office of Juvenile Justice & Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) found among the youth involved in the juvenile justice system, girls' rate of sexual abuse is four times higher than boys', and their rate of complex trauma (five or more Adverse Childhood Experiences) is almost

twice as high.<sup>4</sup> Girls who are justice involved are also more likely than their male counterparts to experience violence, emotional abuse and sexual abuse.<sup>5</sup>

In light of such victimization, certain status offenses such as running away, curfew violations and truancy can be viewed as methods of survival. For example, running away is often a response to abuse, trauma and family conflict.<sup>6</sup> After leaving home, girls may find it difficult to remain connected to school, and thus become truant. This trajectory is common for girls, as running away is one of the most common status offense charges they face.<sup>7</sup>

## ***Child Welfare and Juvenile Justice Involvement for Status Offenses***

Committing a status offense can lead to involvement in either the child welfare or juvenile justice system depending on a young person's location.<sup>8</sup> In some states, these behaviors are included in abuse and neglect statutes, and youth are labeled dependent, neglected or as youth in need of supervision and care.<sup>9</sup> In other states, the very same behaviors may be classified under the juvenile justice system. There are also states that split jurisdiction over status offenses between their juvenile justice and child welfare systems depending on the behavior. For example, in Minnesota underage drinking and

certain types of drug offenses are considered status offenses classified by juvenile justice laws, while running away from home and truancy fall under the jurisdiction of the child welfare system as “children in need of protection services.”<sup>10</sup>

The lack of continuity across and even within states make it difficult to calculate the exact number of girls of color who are systems involved and in out-of-home placement due to status offenses. Even more complicated is the fact that state child welfare systems are not required to collect data on behaviors deemed as status offenses, making invisible the needs of girls of color exhibiting these behaviors for targeted programming and services.

**Too little is known about the intersection of child welfare, juvenile justice and status offenses. In national child welfare data, status behaviors are not considered a specific form of maltreatment, leaving “neglect” or “other” to act as catchall categories without attention to the exact number or demographics of these cases.<sup>11</sup> With the absence of a federal data collection requirement, state-level data are severely limited.**

**Without complete data, systems can miss the role status offenses play in adolescent development, public system involvement, out-of-home placement and overall well-being. Placing a girl in congregate care doubles the risk of juvenile justice involvement, likely due to the difficulties experienced in group homes like threats to personal safety, poorly trained staff and a lack of trauma-informed services.<sup>12</sup> States have the opportunity to develop stronger data collection and analysis measures for status offenses that capture the number and demographics of youth who become system involved for these behaviors. This is the first step toward developing a deeper understanding of their root causes.**

While we lack a comprehensive picture of the total number of girls involved in the child welfare system due to status offenses, the role these behaviors play in girls' involvement in the juvenile justice system is clear. In fact, girls accounted for 40 percent of status offenses that resulted in out of home placement in 2011, although they were just 12 percent of youth receiving such dispositions overall.<sup>13</sup> Further, between 1995 and 2009 cases involving curfew violations increased 23 percent for girls compared to just 1 percent for boys.<sup>14</sup> A similar disparity was found for liquor law violations where cases for girls grew by 41 percent and just 6 percent for boys.<sup>15</sup>

### ***Girls of Color and Intersectionality***

Not nearly enough research has considered how the intersection of race and gender plays out in the lives of girls of color, especially those charged with status offenses. According to intersectionality theory, race, gender, class, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, immigration status and other social identities create unique and often overlapping forms of oppression when combined.<sup>16</sup>

Thus, girls of color sit at the intersection of inequities caused by their race and gender at the very least.

For Black women, these combined oppressions are known as *misogynoir*. The term created by Dr. Moya Bailey combines misogyny and racism and points to not only anti-Blackness in American society, but also male privilege and domination.<sup>17</sup> Due to what Dr. Monique W. Morris calls age compression, Black girlhood is interchangeable with Black womanhood, making Black girls the early victims of *misogynoir*, even before coming to the attention of public systems for status offenses or other behaviors.<sup>18</sup>

### ***The Historical Role of Gender in the Juvenile Justice System***

The juvenile justice system has always played a different role in the lives of girls versus boys. Established in 1899, the first juvenile court differentiated reasons for intervention by gender, leading girls to be locked up for charges associated with their moral depravation. Unlike their male peers, girls were commonly brought to court for frequent attendance

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in pool halls or saloons, using profane language and associating with immoral persons.<sup>19</sup> Juvenile courts' primary focus revolved around monitoring girls' behavior, particularly immigrants and girls of color, to ensure their sexual purity.<sup>20</sup>

More than 100 years after the first juvenile court was founded, gender disparities remain. A study conducted by the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Juvenile Delinquency Alternative Initiative revealed decision makers in the juvenile justice system had a prevailing belief that girls need to be protected from themselves; were afraid of adolescent girls expressing their sexuality in ways that violate social norms; were comfortable with using locked confinement to access services for girls with significant needs; and were intolerant of behavior deemed uncooperative and noncompliant.<sup>21</sup>

Scholars have argued that girls of color face harsher punishment for committing status offenses, including a higher risk of being placed in locked confinement, because their lived experiences often places them outside the prevailing narratives of femininity as reflected in white middle class values.<sup>22</sup> Native American girls are placed at a rate of 179 per 100,000, African American girls at a rate of 123 per 100,000 and Latinx<sup>23</sup> at a rate of 47 per 100,000 youth. By comparison, 37 per 100,000 of non-Hispanic white girls are confined for the same behaviors.<sup>24</sup>

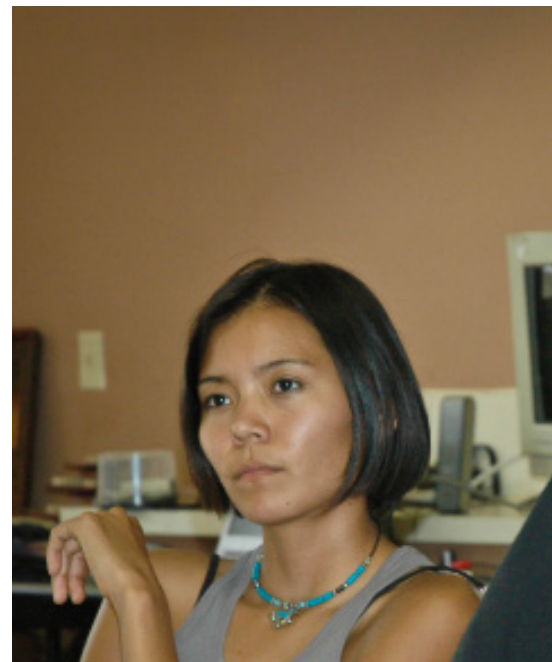
These disparate outcomes can be attributed not only to gender, but also race. Similar to the disparate

treatment of girls versus boys, youth of color have faced racial disparities since the juvenile justice system's inception.

***Implicit Bias and Girls of Color: The Problem with Discretion***

Disparate outcomes surrounding arrest, adjudication and confinement for status offenses likely reflect structural racism, sexism and implicit bias. Implicit bias, or stereotypes that unconsciously affect decision making, may allow widely-held and socially-constructed negative beliefs about marginalized groups like girls of color to influence public systems.<sup>25</sup>

Implicit bias can be both positive and negative and is activated without an individual's control. Every person possesses preconceived beliefs about others based on race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, age and other forms of identity. These beliefs are not a result of individual psychology, but are shaped by the social environment surrounding



us.<sup>26</sup> Stakeholders in public systems are not exempt from implicit biases and the wide latitude of discretion given to juvenile and child welfare courts, led by judges, can make them especially susceptible to biased outcomes.<sup>27</sup>

Family court judges make the ultimate determination in how to respond to young people's behavior and what constitutes rehabilitation. For example, a judge making a determination at disposition in a juvenile case in California considers age, previous history of delinquency and circumstances surrounding the offense, "in addition to other relevant and material evidence."<sup>28</sup> This other "material evidence" is not delineated by law and is open to factors considered at a judge's discretion. California isn't the only state where judges have such wide latitude; a 1996 study of Florida's juvenile courts found "juvenile justice officials make decisions influenced in part by perceptions (or misperceptions) of youths' family backgrounds and circumstances."<sup>29</sup>

While judges are legally the final decision makers, the decision whether or not to place a youth in a juvenile detention or residential treatment facility is often influenced by a host of professionals, such as attorneys, probation officers and social workers. For the between one-half and two-thirds of juvenile justice involved youth who have an open child welfare case at the time of their arrest and adjudication, the number of professionals sharing opinions about their cases likely includes many others as well.<sup>30</sup>



Research has shown that court officials' subjective assessments of young people of color often shape case outcomes for youth and place African-Americans at a disadvantage relative to their white counterparts.<sup>31</sup> One study showed probation officers are more likely to see the behaviors of African-American youth as the result of negative personal attributes, such as a lack of individual responsibility.<sup>32</sup> However, the very same behaviors by whites are

viewed as the result of external causes, such as poverty.<sup>33</sup> These conflicting views regarding race have led decision makers to recommend longer sentences for African American youth than whites.<sup>34</sup> Young people themselves also see racial bias as a factor in their court involvement as 89 percent of youth of color interviewed in a state juvenile correctional system felt they were discriminated against because of their race and ethnicity.<sup>35</sup>

For girls of color, negative biases about their race and gender influence system actors' determinations about their behaviors and punishment. Called "background expectancies," a key component of juvenile justice courts is to make decisions based on a youth's moral character.<sup>36</sup> With societal stereotypes that negatively label girls of color, decisions about their morality are often weighed through a biased lens.

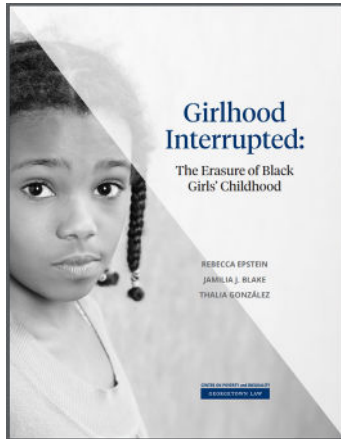
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**"WHEN THEY CONFRONT RACE AND GENDER STEREOTYPES, BLACK WOMEN ARE STANDING IN A CROOKED ROOM, AND THEY HAVE TO FIGURE OUT WHICH WAY IS UP...IT CAN BE HARD TO STAND UP STRAIGHT IN A CROOKED ROOM."**

**- MELISSA HARRIS PERRY, SISTER CITIZEN**



Studies of juvenile records have found girls defined as big, very loud, "criers," promiscuous, manipulative and pouting,<sup>37</sup> with African-American girls viewed as failing to exhibit "traditional feminine demeanors like submissiveness."<sup>38</sup> Research has also found that probation officers often stereotype African-American girls and attribute their delinquent behavior to poor judgment, deviant lifestyle choices and criminality.<sup>39</sup> They are commonly perceived as "independent, aggressive, loud, pushy, rude, sexual, unfeminine, violent, and crime prone."<sup>40</sup>



The adultification of Black girls is captured in *Girlhood Interrupted*, a report by the Center on Poverty and Inequality at Georgetown University Law Center that captures the results of a nationwide study on the perceptions of Black girls. Compared to white girls of the same age, survey participants perceived:

- Black girls need less nurturing
- Black girls need less protection
- Black girls need less support
- Black girls need less comfort
- Black girls are more independent
- Black girls know more about adult topics
- Black girls know more about sex

The report adds to a developing body of research about Black children not only lacking the perception of innocence, but also failing to receive the benefits associated with it, especially when faced with public system involvement. While the effects of this form of implicit bias have yet to be fully studied, authorities viewing Black girls as older could lead to the conclusion that Black girls are more culpable for their actions and deserving of harsher punishment.<sup>44</sup>

Common stereotypes of Latinx girls as submissive, family-oriented and highly sexual also show up in court records.<sup>41</sup> An analysis of juvenile probation court files in Maricopa County, Arizona, found evidence of probation officers' stereotypical thinking, such as the belief that Latinx girls are "brought up to believe that their purpose in life is to stay home and have kids and do nothing."<sup>42</sup>

Beyond the courtroom, research around the presence of combined racial and gender bias in schools demonstrate that Black girls face harsher discipline for not adopting norms associated with white femininity, such as being docile and compliant. As highlighted in *Girlhood Interrupted*, research has found teachers effectively discipline "Black girls for perceived loud and un-ladylike behavior that challenged their authority."<sup>43</sup>

The child welfare system lacks similar research about the role of implicit bias in court records and proceedings. However, youth under child welfare supervision for status offenses face a similar court structure with a judge, social workers, probation officers and other system actors making determinations about their placement and outcomes. With the discretion given to decision makers in juvenile and family courts and the disparate outcomes girls of color face at the hands of public systems, negative stereotypes with serious and detrimental consequences are likely influential.

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**"PORTRAYING AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN AS STEREOTYPICAL MAMMIES, MATRIARCHS, WELFARE RECIPIENTS, AND HOT MOMMAS HELPS JUSTIFY U.S. BLACK WOMEN'S OPPRESSION."**

- PATRICIA HILL COLLINS, BLACK FEMINIST THOUGHT

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### *Policing Girls' Sexuality and Sexual Expression*

Girls' experiences in public systems regarding status offenses often stem from efforts to police their sexual expression and reduce pregnancy rates. Behaviors like missing school, violating curfew, underage drinking and running away not only raise legitimate safety concerns, but also signify unsupervised time where adults fear girls will engage in sexual behavior. The same concern does not exist for boys who lack the pressure to conform to the purity ideals associated with femininity.

Lisa Pasko's research reveals girls are not directly arrested and adjudicated for sexual immorality, but they are indirectly sanctioned for what are deemed as risky sexual behaviors. For example, they are given a higher risk assessment score at arrest and higher incidence of probation violations for behaviors related to sex and sexuality compared to their male peers.<sup>45</sup> System professionals see it as their duty to correct what is viewed as sexual deviance.<sup>46</sup>

Heteronormative bias is also a major problem. Young women identifying as anything other than heterosexual are considered deviant and the result of trauma, instead of displaying a healthy component of adolescent development.<sup>47</sup>

Gender bias around sexuality is apparent in a study from California State University-Fullerton that reviewed over 100 juvenile court files. It found boys' sexual behaviors were only mentioned in their records when associated with potential sex crimes.<sup>48</sup> However, probation officers routinely framed girls' expression of their sexuality as problematic, writing notes such as, "She admitted to having unprotected sex and was not interested in modifying behaviors."

This notion of sexual deviance is especially relevant to the historical experiences of African-American, Latinx and Native American girls and women. Misogynoir perpetuates the historically-rooted myth of Black girls' inherent promiscuity. Common tropes such as the Jezebel, Matriarch and Welfare Queen capture this sentiment, with the Jezebel's sexual immorality, Matriarch's demolition of the male-headed household and Welfare Queen's incessant child-bearing, all cast negative attributes on African-American women's sexual expression and parenthood.<sup>49</sup> Black women aren't alone as Native American and Latinx women face similar stereotypes as promiscuous and hyper sexual.<sup>50</sup>

Despite these common stereotypes, data show that teenage pregnancy rates are down nationally and the greatest decreases have taken place in communities of color.<sup>51</sup> However, Pasko's interviews with probation officers, social workers, therapists and residential placement staff reveal a set of practices that ignore

this fact and focus on the need to address perceived sexual immorality.

- On the topic of a Black girl without a safe placement option engaging in risky behaviors, a probation officer stated "Our main focus right now is to do all we can to keep her from getting pregnant."
- "Pregnancy is probably the biggest problem for us to deal with especially for the Hispanic girls" –Therapist
- On the topic of a girl choosing to have a baby who would have developmental delays, a therapist noted "when she leaves she is going to need a lot of supervision, and we will make sure she is on birth control."
- "All of our girls are on birth control. Because if they do weekend furloughs, we cannot have them getting pregnant...we have them sign forms that they will not have sex or do drugs or drink and when they get back after a long weekend, we give them drug and pregnancy tests and occasionally do [gynecological] exams. If they want a furlough they have to agree to this." –Therapist

Instead of centering on girls' overall well-being, Pasko's interviews revealed a hyper focus on pregnancy and their sexuality. For girls of color, this approach is rooted in stereotypes, bias and historic oppression. In order to begin to shift this negative narrative, there must be changes in both public policy and system practice.



# Recommendations

Allegheny County, Pennsylvania's Department of Human Services (DHS) launched their child welfare system's work focused on Black girls after disaggregating their data by race and gender. The county found Black girls' disproportionate involvement in the child welfare system was exacerbated at adolescence, often the result of "parent child conflict," a status offense that does not involve abuse or neglect.<sup>53</sup> This conflict was also closely linked to the number of Black girls being placed in the county's congregate care facilities at disproportionate rates.<sup>54</sup> DHS has since embarked on efforts to provide services and supports to families experiencing conflict at home to preclude the need for opening a child welfare or juvenile justice case.<sup>55</sup> Their work is part of a larger county-wide movement called the *Black Girls Equity Alliance*. Led by Gwen's Girls, a local nonprofit organization, the group is comprised of over 50 individuals, organizations and government entities working to create systemic change for Black girls.

Too often interventions aimed at youth are myopic in their focus on one segment of their identity. Developing policies, programs and practices that recognize and affirm a youth's full self, including their gender, race and culture have the highest likelihood of adequately addressing the needs of girls of color. Systems and policymakers should work to develop data-driven, research-informed policies, programs and practices that reflect girls' gender identity and expression, race, sexual orientation and culture. Such policies should include:

**A. Collect and report data that captures the involvement of youth in child welfare systems for status offenses**

Currently, a national data set on the number and demographics of youth involved in child welfare systems for committing behaviors that are deemed as status offenses by the juvenile justice system does not exist.<sup>52</sup> In order to understand the needs of this population and develop and bring to scale innovative programs and interventions that serve girls of color who exhibit these behaviors, child welfare systems must collect

data disaggregated by gender, race and ethnicity. Also, for youth who are dually involved in child welfare and juvenile justice systems, data sharing agreements should be put in place to cross match services and supports.

In addition to disaggregating data by gender, race and ethnicity, it is important to collect data on placement type – including foster homes, congregate care settings and residential treatment facilities – to understand the experiences of these youth and how they vary based on gender and race. This is particularly important for girls who identify along the LGBTQ+ spectrum who are more likely than their cisgender or heterosexual peers to be placed in a congregate care setting.

**B. Develop meaningful cross-systems partnerships**

In order to meet the needs of girls of color who are involved in both child welfare and juvenile justice, it is critical to develop and formalize cross-systems partnerships. In addition, many young people involved in child welfare and juvenile justice, are also engaged in behavioral health services. In order to fully meet the



needs of these youth, cross-systems partnerships are essential. These partnerships both meet the needs of youth, by reducing duplication and confusion between workers, and also provide systems with opportunities to leverage and maximize dollars.

**DC Cross Connect in Washington, D.C. is a great example of a cross-system partnership to coordinate services and better serve youth and families. The city's Department of Human Services (DHS), Department of Behavioral Health (DBH) and Children and Families Services Agency (CFSA) have joined to create one unifying case plan that sets priorities, goals and a unified case plan. While DHS, DBH and CFSA comprise DC Cross Connect's core agencies, they frequently partner with schools, the juvenile justice system and other health and social services providers.**

### **C. Implement community-based prevention models that promote youth stability and placement in the community**

Youth do best when they are served safely at home or in their communities. Despite this fact, significant racial and ethnic disproportionality and disparities exist in out-of-home placements across child welfare systems, including placements in restrictive settings like congregate care and residential treatment facilities. Many young women and girls view these placements as unsafe and can experience an increased risk of commercial sexual exploitation and heightened rates of unplanned pregnancy and homelessness.<sup>56</sup>

Currently, there is limited federal funding available through Title IV-B, CAPTA and SSBG to promote community-based, prevention and family preservation programs. Given the current structure

of child welfare financing, states must promote and incentivize cross-systems collaboration in order to draw down federal dollars, leverage available funding and ensure funding strategies are comprehensive. For example, states should utilize state dollars as a Medicaid-match to draw down Medicaid dollars that can be invested into community-based behavioral health services.

### **D. Utilize youth advisory boards and youth engagement strategies to inform effective program development and implementation**

In order for systems to develop effective approaches to meeting the needs of girls of color who have committed status offenses, systems must meaningfully incorporate their voice into programs and policies affecting their lives. Many state and local jurisdictions utilize Citizen Review Panels or Youth Advisory Boards to inform policy and program development. Support for these models through state or local dollars is critical.

In addition, some grant programs require a community-based review board. For example, the Community Prevention Grants Program requires each community to designate a Prevention Policy Board, a multidisciplinary planning board, to increase the effectiveness of prevention efforts and reduce duplication of services. States should require that youth are represented on these boards.

### **E. Fully implement the reauthorized Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act**

Status offenses are closely tied to traumatic and abusive environments, and youth involved in public systems for these behaviors should not be placed in locked confinement. As of 2014, 27 states and territories are doing so using the Valid Court Order Exception (VCO) to the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency and Prevention Act (JJDP), despite research that demonstrates locking youth up for nonviolent offenses can create poor outcomes.<sup>57</sup>

Recently, both the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate passed legislation that reauthorizes the JJDP. While the House bill aims to phase out use of the VCO exception, the Senate bill keeps the provision intact. In order to fully address the underlying issues that lead to status offenses, and not increase the risk of deeper system involvement, the final version of the JJDP passed by the House and Senate should protect youth from being placed in locked confinement for these behaviors.

### F. Create safe and affirming spaces for LGBTQ youth and transgender girls of color

Forty percent of girls in juvenile detention facilities identify as LGBTQ and 85 percent of these girls are girls of color.<sup>58</sup> Once involved in public systems, these mostly young people of color face additional risk of stigma, rejection and trauma. Systems need to create a safe and affirming environment for all youth that includes training on working with LGBTQ youth for staff; best practices for managing and protecting sexual orientation and gender identity and expression (SOGIE) disclosure and data collection; and developing intake procedures that respect a youth's preferred name, pronoun, sleeping arrangement, bathroom and placement in a gendered facility. Also, given that transgender girls of color face unique threats while in locked confinement, systems should ensure the use of specific protocols for their placement that take into account their preferred placement, safety and well-being and ensure connection to appropriate, gender-affirming health and mental health care.

**Florida's child welfare placement protocol for group homes recognizes the need for safe and affirming spaces for transgender youth. The regulations require providers to recognize youth's identified gender when making placement decisions and to consider "physical safety of the transgender youth, emotional well-being of the transgender youth, the youth's preference, the recommendations of the youth's parent (when parental rights have not been terminated), the recommendations of the youth's case manager and the recommendations of the youth's therapist if applicable."**<sup>59</sup>

## A Hopeful Example: PACE Center for Girls, Inc.

PACE Center for Girls is well-established as one of the leading organizations working to prevent girls' involvement in the juvenile justice system. Based in Florida, the organization's prevention and early intervention model prioritizes a strengths-based, trauma-informed and holistic approach, promoting protective factors and working to mitigate the underlying issues girls often face. The gender-responsive program has served more than 40,000 girls between the ages of 11 and 18 and operates in 19 nonresidential locations across the state.



PACE helps girls thrive. Through year-round academic classes, individual assessment and counseling, gender-specific life management training and college and career planning services, the program prides itself on providing high-quality services and supports to meet girls' needs. After participating in the program, girls achieve better academic and health outcomes, self-efficacy and overall well-being.

Haley, a PACE participant, was charged with domestic aggravated battery and placed on probation for getting into a fight. She says the fight was due to her anger issues stemming from the domestic violence and substance abuse she

witnessed at home. Fortunately, Haley was referred to the PACE Center for Girls and as a result, has been able to dramatically improve her life.

Like Haley, girls entering PACE exhibit a variety of risk factors, such as truancy, exposure to abuse or violence, poor academic performance, risky sexual behaviors, all related to trauma and other negative outcomes.<sup>60</sup> In addition, over 30 percent of PACE participants come in with a prior arrest or some type of criminal involvement, and more than half come in with a parent or sibling incarcerated. However, the girls involved in PACE cannot simply be defined by their negative experiences.

After only a year in the program, 92 percent of girls have no involvement with the juvenile justice system. Additionally, up to 94 percent are making academic progress despite the fact that 79 percent of girls were failing one or more classes before coming to PACE. Read more about Haley's story and learn about PACE's outcomes in their [2015 annual report](#).

PACE's values and guiding principles are interwoven into every aspect of the program and serve as the baseline for the development of positive relationships between staff and participants, a crucial component of youth success. According to Chief Program Officer Shana Brodnax, a large part of being gender responsive and honoring the female spirit, means accepting a girl for whoever and however she is and not just allowing, but honoring, all aspects of her identity, including her sexuality, religion, preferences, and the "distinct needs" that result from that identity.

In 2016, PACE was recognized by the Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) as a recipient of its Accelerating Change Award for excelling in its efforts to serve young women and girls of color involved in public systems. Given PACE's extraordinary success in Florida, the program is now exploring opportunities to expand to other states and as a part of the CSSP-convened Accelerating Change Network, working with similar organizations addressing the needs of marginalized girls across the country.

To learn more about PACE Center for Girls visit [pacecenter.org](http://pacecenter.org).

# Conclusion

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**"IF WE'RE GOING TO HEAL, LET IT BE GLORIOUS."**  
**— WARSHAN SHIRE**

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**T**oo often, public systems isolate their policies and practices based upon one segment of a young person's identity. While gender or race or citizenship status may be recognized, not nearly enough attention has been paid to their intersection. In order for girls of color to thrive, their experiences need to be viewed through an intersectional lens that is focused on trauma, healing and well-being.

Without a comprehensive approach to status offenses that uplifts both gender and race, child welfare and juvenile justice systems risk missing a vital opportunity to address the underlying trauma girls of color are experiencing and to disrupt the pipeline between abuse and negative life outcomes. The hope is that the analysis and policy recommendations laid out in this brief situate the current bias and discrimination girls of color are facing within a historical framework; challenge the prevailing negative narrative surrounding girls of color; and add to the national discourse that girls who are victims of trauma, abuse and neglect should not be punished for simply trying to survive.



Photo: Taté Walker, Mniconjou Lakota

**#FIGHTFOROURGIRLS**

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**WE MUST SHIFT THE PREVAILING NARRATIVE AROUND GIRLS OF COLOR FROM ONE ROOTED IN STEREOTYPES, STRUCTURAL OPPRESSION AND IMPLICIT BIAS TO ONE THAT PROMOTES HEALING AND RESILIENCY. WE MUST FIGHT FOR OUR GIRLS.**

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# ENDNOTES


1. Cisgender is a gender identity where an individual's experiences of their own gender agree with the sex they were assigned at birth. Transgender is an umbrella term that describes people whose gender identity differs from expectations associated with the sex they were assigned at birth. See Martin, M., Down, L., & Erney, R. Center for the Study of Social Policy. (2016). *Out of the Shadows: Supporting LGBTQ youth in child welfare through cross-system collaboration*. Retrieved from <http://www.cssp.org/pages/body/Out-of-the-Shadows-Supporting-LGBTQ-youth-in-child-welfare-through-cross-system-collaboration-web.pdf>.
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