

The Sexual Abuse to Prison Pipeline: The Girls' Story

"...Sexual abuse is one of the primary predictors of girls' entry into the juvenile justice system." This report lays out three main entry points into the juvenile justice system for girls who have experienced child sexual abuse, and provides practical suggestions for dismantling the pipeline and advocating for policy changes.

The Research

"The proportion of girls – especially girls of color – in the juvenile justice system is increasing." Although the report calls for additional research to support this conclusion, it posits that girls are not engaging in more criminal activity, but rather that the justice and child welfare systems are responding more aggressively to non-serious offenses committed by girls. Many of these offenses are actually responses to sexual abuse trauma. Some girls then experience further trauma while detained, whether this is additional incidents of sexual abuse or being triggered by the structured environment with very little privacy.

The three system entry points discussed are: (1) detaining girls for status offenses like running away that are actually responses to sexual abuse trauma, (2) jailing girls who are victims of sex trafficking as offenders, and (3) girls crossing over from the child welfare system as a result of unsafe home lives. The support for these conclusions is a vast array of national, regional, and local research, finding that these issues disproportionately impact girls, particularly girls of color and girls who identify as LGBTQ or gender-nonconforming.

Advocacy Tips

Advocates working with youth should be aware of the system responses to survivors of sexual abuse that may be harmful to them. In addition to re-victimization by the criminal justice system, juvenile justice and welfare systems may be ill-equipped to respond to sexual abuse disclosures and the nuances of survivors' reactions and needs.

Here are some ways that advocates can help improve the system response to sexual abuse survivors and start to dismantle the sexual abuse to prison pipeline:

- **Girls who experience sexual assault while in school may act out in ways that run afoul of schools' zero tolerance policies.** This can result in disciplinary action, truancy, and referral to law enforcement. Work with your local schools to help them understand the varying responses to trauma that survivors have and how to modify disciplinary policies to respond to survivors in a trauma-informed way.
- **Child welfare systems do not always screen for sexual abuse history.** Work with your local DSHS office and/or home visitor programs to ensure that a thoughtful screening tool is in place. Support case workers in how to ask questions about sexual abuse and offer to train staff about abuse and trauma response. You report incidents of child abuse to them; they should refer abuse survivors to you for services.
- **Sexual abuse history can impact foster care placement.** Girls with a sexual abuse history may be more likely to be placed in group homes, which in turn makes them more vulnerable to additional incidents of sexual abuse and targeting by traffickers. If you're working with DSHS to ensure screening takes place, make sure to talk about this issue so safe placements are made.
- **Girls who experience sexual abuse are more likely to be at risk for pregnancy before they want it.** Advocates make sure survivors in community get access to basic reproductive health education and care, as well as pregnancy testing and emergency contraception. Work with your juvenile detention facility to ensure detained girls also have access and that youth who are being released have assistance applying for health care coverage and finding providers.
- **Survivors who receive trauma-based intervention while in detention are less likely to re-offend.** Work with your local juvenile detention facility to provide advocacy services to youth who are sexually assaulted in detention. Facilities are required to provide confidential access to advocacy services by the Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA). Ensure that the facility also provides access for survivors whose abuse occurred prior to detention and informs youth who are being released about your services in community.
- **These issues particularly impact girls of color and LGBTQ/gender-nonconforming youth.** Your systems advocacy should include addressing this reality. Additionally, make sure your agency is a welcoming and culturally relevant place for these survivors.

References

Saar, M. et al (2015), [The Sexual Abuse to Prison Pipeline: The Girls' Story](#), *Human Rights Project for Girls*.