

## GIRLS OF COLOR AND TRAUMA

YWCA believes that all trauma survivors should have access to culturally competent supportive services to help them heal and thrive. This is particularly true for girls, who experience higher rates of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) during their formative years. Research confirms that ACEs can have significant long-term impacts on a young person's physical and mental health, as well as on their education and life outcomes. Often these needs go unaddressed, in large part because there are far too few psychologists, social workers, and other counselors present in schools and community centers. These mental health professionals might otherwise identify trauma and provide support before survivors are punished for their behavioral responses to trauma.

Unfortunately, many girls of color who experience trauma are criminalized instead of being given appropriate community-based support. Behaviors that represent what the National Child Traumatic Stress Network describe as coping mechanisms to deal with trauma and to keep safe from further danger<sup>i</sup> – such as running away, aggressiveness, truancy, and other responses that are concentrated among girls and young women who have experienced trauma – are criminalized. This criminalization is a driving force behind the overrepresentation of girls of color in the school discipline and juvenile justice systems. The underlying gendered bias that all girl survivors experience is exacerbated for girls of color, who also experience intersectional biases related to racial stereotypes and cultural norms about appropriate feminine behavior.

### YWCA POSITION

YWCA supports efforts to ensure that girls of color who have experienced trauma have improved access to community resources to address that trauma, including in the health, education and juvenile justice systems. To this end, YWCA supports federal, state, and local legislation and policies that expand the availability of community- and school-based services. YWCA also supports efforts to ensure that health, education, and juvenile justice system staff who interact with youth receive training on and utilize trauma-informed practices that enable trauma survivors to heal and thrive.

### BACKGROUND

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) have far-reaching implications on health, education, and life outcomes.

- Sixty percent of American children have been exposed to violence, crime or abuse in their homes, schools and communities.<sup>ii</sup> According to a recent U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ)-funded study, almost 40 percent of American children were direct victims of two or more violent acts, and one in 10 were victims of violence five or more times.<sup>iii</sup> Almost one in 10 saw one family member assault another family member, and more than 25 percent have been exposed to family violence during their life.<sup>iv</sup>
- Researchers have found that exposure to multiple childhood traumas such as sexual abuse, emotional neglect, domestic violence, substance abuse among household members, and

other ACEs can cause a host of long-term negative physical and emotional health outcomes such as heart disease, cancer and depression.<sup>v</sup>

- Evolving research suggests that exposure to historical factors such as poverty, racism, discrimination, bullying, and community violence are also adverse events that can impact young people's health and well-being.<sup>vi</sup>
- Individuals with high ACE scores (reflecting multiple childhood traumas) can struggle with educational attainment. Exposure to trauma can impact school performance, resulting in lower GPAs, a higher number of school absences, decreased reading ability, more suspensions and expulsions, and a higher dropout rate.<sup>vii</sup>
- Exposure to multiple traumas can also lead to other negative outcomes, including self-harming behaviors, homelessness, early childbearing, poverty, unemployment, dependence on public assistance, and relationship difficulties.<sup>viii</sup>

Girls who experience multiple childhood traumas are at heightened risk of contact with the juvenile justice system and other negative outcomes.

- In a study of ACEs among justice-involved youth, 45 percent of girls had experienced five or more ACEs, making their rate of complex trauma nearly twice as high as boys.<sup>ix</sup> The rate of sexual abuse for girls who are involved in the juvenile justice system is four times higher than it is for boys.<sup>x</sup>
- More than 90 percent of girls in juvenile justice systems self-disclose trauma.<sup>xi</sup>
- According to the Survey of Youth in Residential Placement, 42 percent of girls (versus 22 percent of boys) in custody reported past physical abuse, 44 percent (versus 19 percent of boys) reported past suicide attempts, and 35 percent (versus eight percent of boys) reported past sexual abuse.<sup>xii</sup>
- Girls are far more likely than boys to develop PTSD, depression, and other internalized behaviors from exposure to traumatic events.<sup>xiii</sup>
- Girls are often referred to justice systems from schools as a result of the criminalization of behaviors common to those who have experienced trauma, like fighting with their peers, disrupting class, and talking back.<sup>xiv</sup>
- Girls' presence in the juvenile justice system is also often caused by the criminalization of survival crimes like running away, truancy, and other behavioral responses to particular types of trauma and violence that are concentrated among girls and young women, including sex trafficking and sexual violence.<sup>xv</sup> Detention in juvenile facilities is widely viewed as unnecessary for public safety, and can be re-traumatizing for trauma survivors.
- Exposure to trauma also increases girls' likelihood of involvement with antisocial romantic partners, which increases their risk of subsequent intimate partner violence.<sup>xvi</sup>

Girls of color experience disparities across a range of factors in the health, education, and justice systems, and research suggests that these outcomes are the result of responses to trauma.

- Children of color are at an increased risk of experiencing traumatic events – such as displacement, sexual abuse, poverty, witnessing violence, or experiencing racial

discrimination<sup>xvii</sup> - and are much less likely to receive treatment to address trauma. This leads to disparate rates of post-traumatic stress.<sup>xviii</sup>

- Girls of color, particularly Latina girls, experience a much higher prevalence of mental health concerns like feeling sad or hopeless (47 percent), seriously considering suicide (26 percent), and attempting suicide (15 percent), compared to other groups.<sup>xix</sup> These conditions are not uncommon among trauma survivors.
- Approximately 40 percent of Black women report experiencing coercive sexual contact by age 18, indicating a high rate of sexual trauma among girls of color.<sup>xx</sup>
- Black girls are suspended from school at higher rates (12%) than girls of any other race or ethnicity, and at higher rates than White boys (6%) and White girls (2%). American Indian/Alaska Native girls (7%) and Latinas (4%) are also suspended at rates that exceed those of white girls.<sup>xxi</sup> Suspension from school increases the likelihood of dropping out and having contact with the juvenile justice system, with long-term consequences for Black and Latina girls.<sup>xxii</sup>
- Girls of color also have the highest rates of confinement in juvenile facilities for non-violent status offenses typically associated with responses to underlying trauma – like truancy, curfew violations, and running away – that are only punishable because of a young person’s age. Native American girls are detained at a rate of 179 per 100,000, Black girls at a rate of 123 per 100,000, and Latinas at a rate of 47 per 100,000, while only 37 per 100,000 non-Hispanic White girls are confined for the same behaviors.<sup>xxiii</sup>
- For nonviolent, “public order” offenses such as gambling and prostitution, Latinx youth are more likely than White youth to be admitted to state public facilities, and are incarcerated more than 50 percent longer than White youth (220 days vs. 147 days).<sup>xxiv</sup>

## POLICY RESPONSES THAT CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE

- Prioritize girls of color in policy research and in the collection, analysis, and dissemination of health care, school discipline, and juvenile justice system data. More complete, disaggregated intersectional data would allow service providers and policymakers to develop more informed approaches to addressing the distinct needs of girls of color.
- Expand the availability and coordination of community- and school-based services to support the behavioral and mental health needs of trauma survivors.
- Provide policy guidelines and resources to promote the use of gender- and culturally-responsive, trauma-informed, and developmentally appropriate approaches in health, education, and justice system settings.
- Scale up and fund professional development and training for health care professionals, law enforcement officers, court personnel, correctional officers, teachers, school resources officers, and other youth-serving personnel in cultural competence, implicit bias, trauma-informed practice, classroom management, and alternatives to exclusionary discipline.
- Expand the use of restorative practices and other programmatic alternatives to school discipline policies that rely on suspensions and expulsions in response to behaviors that are associated with responses to trauma. Similarly, expand the use of restorative practices,

community-based treatment, and other alternatives to incarceration for trauma survivors who come into contact with juvenile justice and adult criminal justice systems.

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<sup>i</sup> The National Child Traumatic Stress Network. (2014). Resilience and Child Traumatic Stress, Retrieved 13 January 2017 from [http://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/assets/pdfs/resilience\\_and\\_child\\_traumatic\\_stress\\_0316.pdf](http://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/assets/pdfs/resilience_and_child_traumatic_stress_0316.pdf).

<sup>ii</sup> U.S. Department of Justice. (2010). Defending Childhood. Retrieved 15 January 2017 from <https://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/ag/legacy/2010/09/23/dc-factsheet.pdf>.

<sup>iii</sup> Id.

<sup>iv</sup> Id.

<sup>v</sup> Vincent J. Felitti, et al. *Relationship of Childhood Abuse and Household Dysfunction to Many of the Leading Causes of Death in Adults*. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 14.4 (1998): 245-58. Retrieved 15 January 2017 from [http://www.ajpmonline.org/article/S0749-3797\(98\)00017-8/abstract](http://www.ajpmonline.org/article/S0749-3797(98)00017-8/abstract).

<sup>vi</sup> The National Child Traumatic Stress Network. (2008). Child Trauma Toolkit for Educators. Retrieved 15 January 2017 from <https://wmich.edu/sites/default/files/attachments/u57/2013/child-trauma-toolkit.pdf>.

<sup>viii</sup> Agelique G. Day. *Evaluation of a Trauma-Informed School Intervention with Girls in a Residential Facility School: Student Perceptions of School Environment*. *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma* 24:10 (2015). Retrieved 15 January 2017 from <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10926771.2015.1079279>.

<sup>ix</sup> Saar, M.S., Epstein, R., Rosenthal, L. and Vafa, Y. *The Sexual Abuse to Prison Pipeline: The Girls' Story*. Human Rights Project for Girls. Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality, and Ms. Foundation for Women (2015) at p. 8-9. See also Balck, A. *Gender Injustice: System-Level Juvenile Justice Reforms for Girls*. The National Crittenton Foundation and the National Women's Law Center (2015) at p. 20 and 26.

<sup>x</sup> Id.

<sup>xi</sup> Julian D. Ford, et al. (2007). *Trauma Among Youth in the Juvenile Justice System: Critical Issues and New Direction*. Retrieved 15 January 2017 from [http://www.ncmhjj.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/2007\\_Trauma-Among-Youth-in-the-Juvenile-Justice-System.pdf](http://www.ncmhjj.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/2007_Trauma-Among-Youth-in-the-Juvenile-Justice-System.pdf).

<sup>xii</sup> "Policy Guidance: Girls and the Justice System." Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (2015) at p. 3.

<sup>xiii</sup> David Toffin and Edna B. Foa. *Sex Differences in Trauma and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: A Quantitative Review of 25 Years of Research*. *Psychological Bulletin*, 132:6 (2016).

<sup>xiv</sup> Sherman, F.T., and Balck, A. (2015). *Gender Injustice: System-Level Juvenile Justice Reforms for Girls*, supra note ix at p.16.

<sup>xv</sup> Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. *Policy Guidance: Girls and the Justice System*. (2015) at p. 3. See also, Kerig, P.K., and Ford, J.D. *Trauma Among Girls in the Juvenile Justice System*. (2014). National Child Traumatic Stress Network; and *Gender Injustice: System-Level Juvenile Justice Reforms for Girls*, id. at p. 6.

<sup>xvi</sup> The National Child Traumatic Stress Network. (2014). *Trauma among Girls in the Juvenile Justice Systems*. Retrieved 15 January 2017 from [http://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/assets/pdfs/trauma\\_among\\_girls\\_in\\_the\\_jj\\_system\\_2014.pdf](http://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/assets/pdfs/trauma_among_girls_in_the_jj_system_2014.pdf).

<sup>xvii</sup> Institute for Safe Families. (2013). *Findings from the Philadelphia Urban Ace Survey*. Retrieved 15 January 2017 from <http://www.instituteforsafefamilies.org/sites/default/files/isfFiles/Philadelphia%20Urban%20ACE%20Report%202013.pdf>.

<sup>xviii</sup> Center for the Study of Social Policy. (2015). *Dismantling the Pipeline: Addressing the Needs of Young Women and Girls of Color Involved in Intervening Public Systems*. Retrieved 15 January 2017 from <http://www.cssp.org/pages/body/WGOC-policy-oct2015-spreads.pdf>.

<sup>xix</sup> Kann L, McManus T, Harris WA, et al. (2015). *Youth risk behavior surveillance - United States, 2015. Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, 59(SS-5). Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Retrieved 15 January 2015 from <http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/65/ss/ss6506a1.htm>.

<sup>xx</sup> Women of Color Network. (2006). *Women of Color Network Facts & Stats Collection: Sexual Violence, Communities of Color*. Retrieved 15 January 2017 from [http://www.doj.state.or.us/victims/pdf/women\\_of\\_color\\_network\\_facts\\_sexual\\_violence\\_2006.pdf](http://www.doj.state.or.us/victims/pdf/women_of_color_network_facts_sexual_violence_2006.pdf).

<sup>xxi</sup> "Civil Rights Data Collection, Data Snapshot: School Discipline." U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights Issue Brief No. 1 (March 2014) at p. 3.

<sup>xxii</sup> Crenshaw, K.W., Ocen, P. and Nanda, J. *Black Girls Matter: Pushed Out, Overpoliced and Underprotected*. African American Policy Forum and Center for Intersectionality and Social Policy Studies (2015) at p. 24. See also, Graves, F.G., Kaufmann, L.S., and Frohlich, L. "Unlocking Opportunity for African American Girls: A Call to Action for Educational Equity." NAACP Legal Defense & Education Fund, Inc., and National Women's Law Center (2014) Executive Summary at p. 2.

<sup>xxiii</sup> "Fight for our Girls: Status Offenses." Center for the Study of Social Policy (2016) p. 3.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Villarruel, F.A., and Walker, N.E. "Donde esta la justicia? A call to action on behalf of Latino and Latina youth in the U.S. justice system." Michigan State University Institute for Children, Youth and Families (2002) at p. 2-3.