

Status of Young Women in the Juvenile Justice System Preliminary Data

Young women involved in the juvenile justice system present with characteristics and experiences that differentiate them from their male counterparts. As such, the juvenile justice system in Iowa must consider these factors if it is to effectively and efficiently impact recidivism and rehabilitation.

Characteristics that distinguish a young woman from a young man in the juvenile justice system:

- *She has experienced sexual abuse at a higher reported rate.
- *She is more likely to be held in detention for a misdemeanor offense.
- *If she re-offends, the probability that she will commit a property offense decreases and the probability that she will commit a violent offense increases.
- *She has different mental health issues, particularly depression.
- *She struggles with body image issues.
- *She is white, however African American girls are a significantly higher portion of the juvenile justice population than they are of the general population.
- *She is at the “front end” of the Juvenile Justice system. As juveniles penetrate deeper into the system, numbers of young women diminish.
- *She has been charged with shoplifting, liquor law violations, simple assault and/or disorderly conduct (top four offenses for young women).
- *She is more likely to be taken into custody for running away.
- *She shares similar traits and experiences of women in the adult corrections system.

***“I had been abused
since the age of 7,
my parents
terminated rights.
I lived in
lots of placements.
When I get
comfortable,
I freak out.”
~ Sara, age 17***

Historically, young women have been a smaller segment of the juvenile justice population. They remain so today. Consequently, they are easy to overlook. But Iowa’s response to them is no less important. Perhaps, because they are fewer in number, our system can have a true and meaningful influence with prevention of further penetration into both the juvenile and adult systems being the ultimate goal.

Knowledge of existing research on what differentiates young women begins to acquaint us with the unique pathways that lead them into the juvenile justice system. Extending that research and acting on it by intentionally taking gender into consideration in program and system design allows us to begin to impact the rising rate of young women in the juvenile justice system.

Status of Young Women in the Juvenile Justice System Policy Implications

The Girls' Summit on young women in Iowa's juvenile justice system, held October 12th, presented the above as well as a range of other pertinent data to participants from justice and policy related fields. These participants were then asked to evaluate the information and make recommendations for action.

***"The worst part
[in court]
was hearing
my parents say
they couldn't handle
me at home."
~ Corey, age 15***

Recommendations fell into three broad categories:

Designing Gender Specific Programs

It is necessary for programs that address the juvenile justice population to adopt principals that respond to the needs of young women. This includes meaningful educational and vocational alternatives, comprehensive sexuality education and appropriate health care services. Special emphasis should be placed on increasing family involvement, addressing traumatic abuse and deliberative planning for transitions between programs, to and from home and from the juvenile system to independent adulthood. Overall, there needs to be an increase in gender specific programming across the continuum of the juvenile justice system.

Shifting the System for Better Results

Justice system entities can more effectively address the unique needs of young women by increasing collaboration within and making a commitment to system improvement. Included in systemic change would be earlier intervention and the use of assessment tools that consider gender differences. In addition, system officials must be given more flexibility in dealing with system involved youth. Currently, services based on need are more easily obtained and funded when young women have delinquent complaints filed against them. Services should be available without pulling them into the justice system. Of particular importance is the overlap among delinquent females and females with significant mental health and/or substance abuse and trauma related issues.

Investing in Young Women for Improved Outcomes

Policymakers and the public need to be better informed about not only the differences that exist among juveniles based on gender but the misconceptions that abound and hamper efforts to effectively divert young women from the juvenile justice system. Community support is important to the success of young women, particularly in the many rural areas of our state. Legislative support for gender specific programming is crucial in order to provide the funds and training necessary to implement it. Moreover, policymakers and program providers would benefit from research about young women and the efficacy of both existing programming and emerging best practices.

An expanded report will be available prior to the 2008 session of the Iowa Legislature.

The Girls Summit: Status of Females in the Juvenile Justice System was sponsored by:

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