What About the Girls?

Adolescent Health & Well-Being

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Are there more "bad girls" than there used to be?

Compared with previous generations, adolescent girls are getting into trouble with the law and with their peers at a rate much higher than their mothers' generation or even that of their older sisters.

The number of girls in juvenile-justice facilities has increased 98 percent in the same time that the increase for boys was 29 percent. It follows that the number of adult female offenders also is skyrocketing.

A closer look, though, reveals a far more complex reality than simplistic labels.

Many "bad" behaviors exhibited by at-risk girls are, in fact, coping mechanisms for abuse, neglect, violence, family dysfunction, and the betrayal of trust experienced by too many young women. In one study, fully 97 percent of girls in a probation hall had experienced multiple traumas prior to their detention.

We can't excuse or ignore bullying or law-breaking, or shrug away teen pregnancies and the resultant impact of unstable family lives, but we can better investigate the reasons for the fear, the acting out, and the unwise choices that are too often the by-products of the time that girls spend in the child-welfare and juvenile-justice systems. We can explore ways to better recognize and harness the strength and resilience of girls and develop strategies to help them break out of intergenerational cycles of violence and abuse.

That is why Stoneleigh Foundation dedicated our annual symposium to ask, "What About the Girls?" in both the child-welfare system (foster care) as well as the juvenile-justice system. It disturbs us that there is a basic lack of awareness of how the challenges faced by girls differ markedly from those of boys.

For example, while boys tend to find themselves in danger from people who dislike them (rival gangs for example), the violence in girls' lives usually comes from those to whom they are saying, "I love you." If we don't

take differences like those into account, we can't help the girls who need help.

Perhaps the problems of at-risk girls are invisible to many of us because no one thinks to ask, what about the girls?

Girls' biology means they face different threats to their well-being. Consider this: A national study of preteens and teens in public schools found that 80 percent had experienced some form of sexual harassment, 42 percent of rape victims are under 18, and one in five female victims of stalking are aged 11 to 17. Girls make up 59 percent of the victims of violence against juveniles and 79 percent of those violent acts are sexual assaults. As our conference's keynote speaker, Malika Saada Saar, the director of Rights4Girls, has pointed out, in a recent FBI raid in 70 cities, 60 percent of the child sex-trafficking victims were children from foster care or group homes.

It is a bitter irony: The foster-care system, which is supposed to provide a safe haven for children who have been the victims of abuse and neglect often ends up being places where they are further victimized and trapped. Girls in the child-welfare system face more teen pregnancies, bad birth outcomes, and poor health, and they are more likely to abuse their own children. For many girls, the child-welfare system leads directly to the juvenile-justice system.

Once there, girls face a "one size fits all" approach to rehabilitation, and that one size fits boys. The juvenile-justice system is designed to serve boys, based on research into their psychology and their needs.

At our symposium, Temple University junior Larbriah Morgan, who spent most of her life in foster care but has managed to stay in school, noted that she had to find her way by "doing the opposite of what I saw" from many of the women in her own family. As she looks back, she believes that she, and countless young women like her, would benefit from the guidance of adult women who have survived similar odds.

Indeed, the whole system would be transformed if it started paying attention to what it means to be a girl in the 21st century, and focused on the best ways to help girls become healthy and safe adult women who control their own destinies.