

# Girls in the Pennsylvania Juvenile Justice System

2025 Report



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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# GIRLS

# IN THE PENNSYLVANIA

# JUVENILE JUSTICE SYSTEM

The Pennsylvania juvenile justice system has historically operated with a focus on addressing the needs of boys. Given that boys account for roughly 75% of the juvenile justice population<sup>1</sup>, girls entering the system are often treated as exceptions rather than a significant demographic. Consequently, implemented policies, practices, and programs often fail to account for their unique circumstances.

More recently, however, the system has increasingly recognized the distinct needs and experiences of girls. This has led to a shift toward gender-responsive approaches aimed at improving outcomes for this population. Gender-responsive programming

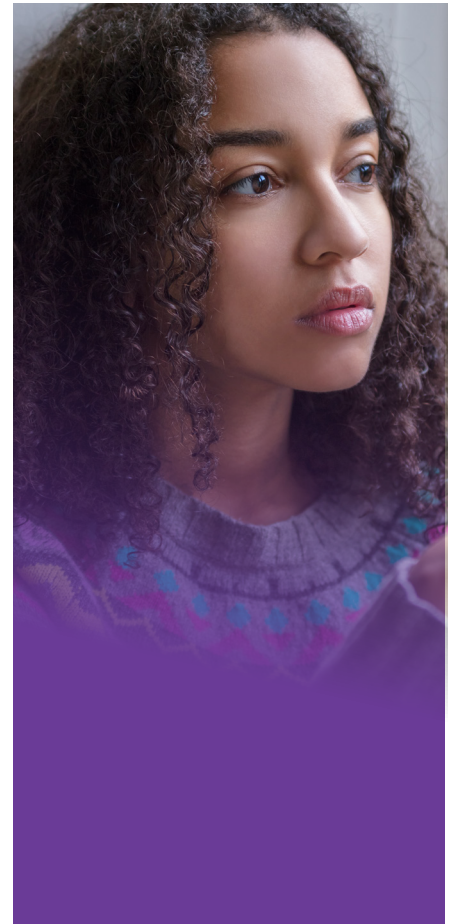
acknowledges that girls and boys often have different needs and experiences that require tailored approaches. For female youth, this often includes providing trauma-informed care, mental and behavioral health support, and diversion programs that focus on rehabilitation rather than punitive measures. These programs are designed to address the root causes of delinquent behavior and provide young women with the support they need to heal and subsequently thrive in society, rather than being detained, placed, or subjected to overly punitive responses.

Challenges remain, however, in Pennsylvania. While gender-responsive initiatives have gained

momentum, there is still a need for continued investment in research, programming, and policy reforms that can ensure long-term systemic change for girls in the juvenile justice system. In the following pages, five key takeaways about girls in the Pennsylvania juvenile justice system will be presented. Practical recommendations to improve the outcomes for girls will also be provided.

## Terminology

In this report, we focus on the experiences of “girls” in the juvenile justice system. While we often compare their experiences to those of “boys”, this binary (boy/girl) framing is not meant to suggest that gender exists only in two categories. Rather, it is a reflection of how gender data has been historically collected within systems. We acknowledge that gender and gender identity exist across a broad continuum. Substantial steps have been taken to better collect this information, and it is our goal to evaluate the experiences of all youth in future iterations of this report.





# 1

## The pathway to the juvenile justice system is different for girls vs. boys.

Nationally, girls and boys enter the juvenile justice system on different pathways. These pathways are shaped by distinct experiences for each group.

Girls' involvement is frequently rooted in experiences of trauma, abuse, and family instability. Pathways such as running away from unsafe home environments, survival-driven behaviors, and responses to victimization often lead to girls' contact with law enforcement<sup>2,3,4</sup>.

On the other hand, boys are more likely to enter the system due to acts of violence, rebellion, defiance, property crimes, or gang-related activities<sup>5</sup>. Because of this,

girls are more likely to enter the juvenile justice system for acts committed at school or at home, while boys are more likely to enter the system via acts committed out in the community.

Local data from school-based referrals supports these national trends. First, girls were 1.5 times more likely to have a school-based referral than boys, and despite accounting for one in four written allegations (23%), girls account for more than one in three (37%) school-related referrals.

The table below shows the referral source for each gender. Girls were most likely to be referred to the juvenile justice system by

schools (37%) and law enforcement (38%). On the other hand, boys were overwhelmingly referred to the juvenile justice system by law enforcement (55%).

Girls are  
**1.5**  
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## 2023 REFERRAL SOURCE OF GIRLS VS. BOYS

Referral Source	Girls	Boys
Law Enforcement	38%	55%
School-Based Referral	37%	27%
Magisterial District Judge	21%	13%
Other Juvenile Court	3%	4%
Other	1%	1%



Examining the specific offenses that lead to school-based referrals for girls versus boys in the juvenile justice system provides valuable insight into the underlying factors driving these differences.

Girls often face disproportionate discipline for behaviors that are not considered as problematic in boys. For example, girls tend to be disciplined more frequently for verbal or physical conflicts or emotional expressions at home or in the classroom<sup>6</sup>. This, however, reflects social behavior, not necessarily delinquency. When schools lack proper resources and skills to address behavioral issues, teachers or administrators often refer girls to law enforcement, resulting in delinquency charges for

minor infractions. When boys engage in similar behavior, it is often normalized and accepted as “boys will be boys.”

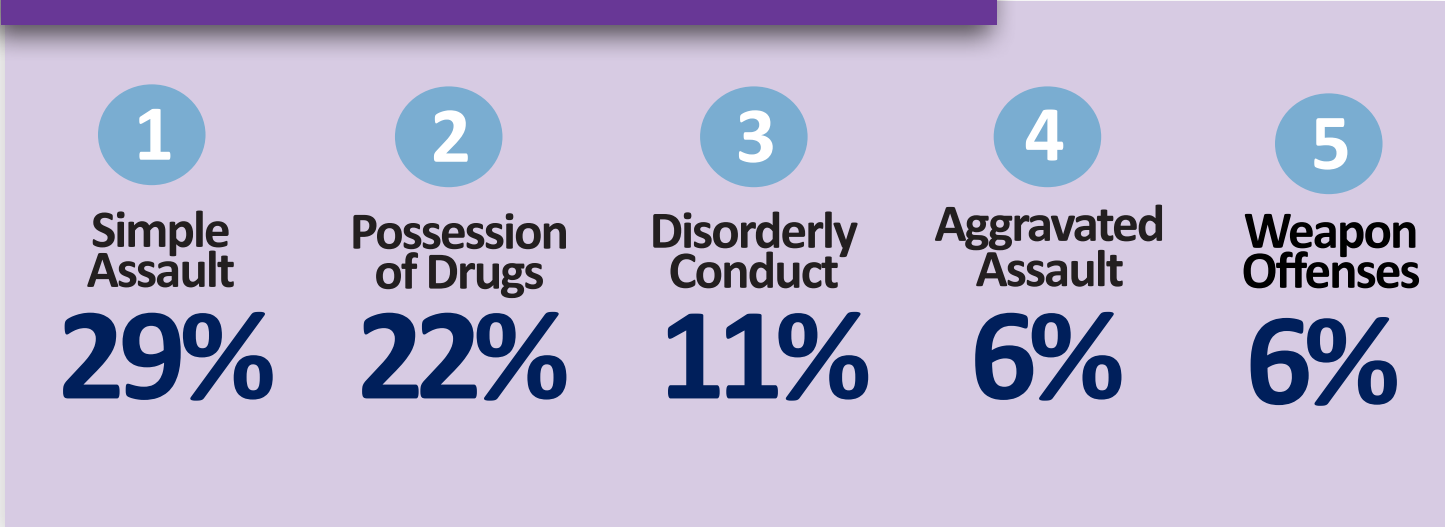
Local data again support these identified gendered differences in offending patterns, with girls much more likely to be referred to the juvenile justice system from schools for behavior-related incidents. Nearly one in three school-based referrals were the result of Simple Assault (29%). This, combined with Disorderly Conduct (11%) and Aggravated Assault (6%), accounts for nearly 50% of school-based offenses referred to juvenile probation departments. Possession of Drugs (22%) and Weapons Offenses (6%) round out the top 5 offenses committed by

girls in school. Comparatively, boys are most likely to be referred from schools for: Possession of Drugs (20%), Simple Assault (19%), Weapons Offenses (10%), Terroristic Threats (9%), and Disorderly Conduct (7%).



When schools lack proper resources and skills to address behavioral issues, teachers or administrators often refer girls to law enforcement, resulting in criminal charges for minor infractions.

## 2023 TOP FEMALE SCHOOL-BASED OFFENSES



## 2

### Girls commit different types of offenses than boys.

Girls are more likely to become involved with the juvenile justice system for offenses that differ significantly from boys. Specifically, girls commit less serious types of offenses<sup>5</sup>.

As noted previously, girls are most likely to be referred for a school-based offense to the juvenile justice system for behavior-related incidents. This trend is also true for delinquent offenses that occur outside of school<sup>6</sup>.

In 2023, the most common offenses committed by girls in Pennsylvania were primarily behavior-driven, including Simple

Assault (18%), Aggravated Assault (6%), and Disorderly Conduct (5%). In contrast, boys were more frequently referred to the juvenile justice system for Theft-Related Offenses (16%), Simple Assault (10%), Possession of Drugs (8%), Weapons Offenses (8%), and Terroristic Threats (5%).

Additionally, a larger proportion of offenses committed by girls compared to boys were non-felonies. In 2023, 81% of offenses committed by girls were a non-felony, compared to 63% of offenses committed by boys.

Violent crimes and firearm-re-

lated offenses were notably rare among girls, with only 5% of offenses involving firearms in Pennsylvania being committed by girls.

#### TOP 5 FEMALE OFFENSES

1

Simple  
Assault  
**18%**

2

Possession of  
Drugs  
**10%**

3

Theft-Related  
Offenses  
**7%**

4

Aggravated  
Assault  
**6%**

5

Disorderly  
Conduct  
**5%**



### 3

## Girls enter the juvenile justice system with different needs than boys.

In addition to entering the juvenile justice system on a different pathway and for different types of offenses, girls enter the juvenile justice system with different needs than boys. Girls are more likely to have histories of trauma, abuse, and neglect compared to boys, which can thus disproportionately influence their delinquent actions<sup>2,3,4</sup>. As a result of these needs, girls may exhibit behaviors such as acting out, defiance, or aggression, and these behaviors are often linked to untreated or undiagnosed mental health conditions<sup>6</sup>. In turn, these behaviors are considered delinquent and result in involvement with the justice system. This distinction highlights the importance of understanding the underlying causes of delinquency, particularly for girls, and the need for interventions that address their unique experiences.

In Pennsylvania, three separate assessment tools are available to help stakeholders identify the various needs of both boys and girls. The Youth Level of Service /Case Management Inventory™

(YLS) is used to identify the criminogenic needs of youth. The Massachusetts Youth Screening Instrument (MAYSI-2) is used to assess the behavioral and mental health needs of delinquent youth. Finally, the Child Trauma Screen (CTS) is used to assess the trauma-related needs of delinquent youth. These three tools are designed to be used together to help inform the unique treatment and services that should be offered to youth via case plans.

In 2023, data from completed MAYSI-2 assessments revealed notable disparities in the rates at which girls and boys exhibited mental and behavioral health concerns and ultimately required further evaluation. Girls were four times as likely to show clinically significant concerns on somatic symptoms, three times as likely to show clinically significant concerns on the Depressed – Anxious scale, and 2.5 times more likely to show clinically significant concerns on the Angry – Irritable scale. In addition, nearly one in five females

**Girls enter the juvenile justice system with more behavioral health needs, mental health needs, and trauma than boys.**

**Massachusetts Youth Screening Instrument (MAYSI-2)** is used by 35 counties to assess the behavioral health needs of delinquent youth at the time of intake. The tool is a self-report inventory of 52 “Yes” or “No” questions designed to gauge if the youth has experiences across six primary scales: alcohol/drug use, angry-irritable, depressed-anxious, somatic complaints, suicide ideation, and thought disturbance (boys only). Depending on the responses to the questions, youth are flagged for additional assessment or follow-up with a mental health professional.





assessed displayed clinically significant signs of suicide ideation, compared to less than 1 in 10 boys.

Overall, girls were more than twice as likely as boys to be classified as a critical case, presenting more complex or severe behavioral concerns that required urgent intervention and resources. Data from the CTS also revealed notable disparities in the rates at which boys and girls exhibited trauma-based symptoms. Girls were significantly more likely to have been exposed to a greater number of traumatic events and to report more trauma reactions than boys:

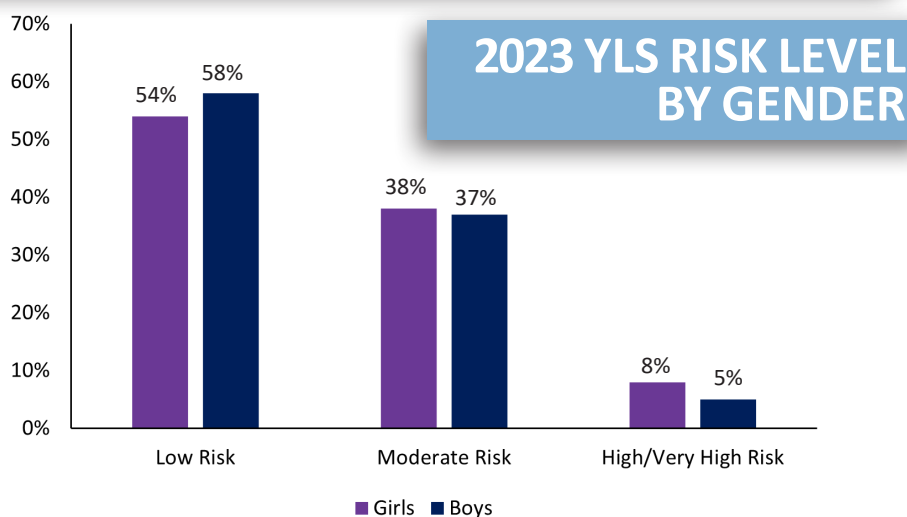
- Girls endorsed an average of 1.9 events vs. 1.4 events for boys.
- Girls endorsed an average of 2.8 Reactions vs. 1.9 reactions for boys.
- Girls scored higher on the reactions portion than boys: 5.3 vs. 3.3, respectively.

Overall, almost two times as many

girls were “screened in” for a secondary assessment than boys. These stark differences between boys and girls further underscore the need for early identification of these drivers, as well as gender – responsive interventions.

The final assessment tool available in Pennsylvania is the YLS. Interestingly, girls did not differ from boys in either their overall risk to reoffend or top-scoring criminogenic needs. Overall, 54% of females scored as low risk to reoffend, 38% scored as moderate risk to reoffend, and 8% scored as high / very high risk to reoffend. Comparatively, 58% of males scored as low risk to reoffend, 37% scored as moderate risk to reoffend, and 5% scored as high/very high risk to reoffend. The top scoring criminogenic needs for both boys and girls are: education/employment; personality/behavior; and leisure/recreation.

**The Child Trauma Screen (CTS)** is used by 25 counties at intake to assess child traumatic stress. The tool is designed to identify youth who are likely to be suffering from trauma exposure and would benefit from being referred for a more comprehensive trauma-focused assessment by a trained clinician.



## Girls are...



# 4 Times

as likely to show clinically significant concerns on the Somatic Complaints scale on the CTS.



# 3 Times

as likely to show clinically significant concerns on the Depressed – Anxious scale on the CTS.



# 2.5 Times

as likely to show clinically significant concerns on the Angry – Irritable scale on the CTS.



# 4

## The majority of cases involving girls do not receive formal sanctions.



The majority of cases involving girls do not receive formal sanctions. In general, the more serious the outcome, the less likely a girl is to receive it.

First, most cases involving girls do not result in detention. Detaining a youth is one of the most serious decisions that can be made when they have been alleged to have committed a delinquent offense. In Pennsylvania, a narrow set of criteria exists for when a youth can be securely detained, which are primarily centered on immediate community safety concerns, and youth should only be de-

tained if they cannot be safely released. Most youth are detained pre-adjudication, while they await a formal decision on their case.

In 2023, only 1 in 7 secure detention admissions were for girls. More than 85% of secure detention admissions were for boys.

**Most cases involving girls are diverted from adjudication.**

Second, most cases involving girls are diverted from adjudication. Diversion programs are those opportunities designed to redirect youth away from additional formal processing in the juvenile justice system, while still providing interventions if needed. Deflection refers to an intervention strategy designed to redirect youth away from formal involvement in the justice system at the earliest possible stage. Unlike diversion, which typically happens after a youth has already been arrested or processed through the early stages of the system, deflection occurs before formal legal action is taken, often during the point of initial contact with law enforcement or other authorities. The goal of deflection is to prevent youth from entering the formal justice system altogether,

providing them with alternative interventions or resources that address underlying issues such as family problems, mental health concerns, or substance abuse.

While there is little data available on deflection in Pennsylvania, the existing statistics do indicate that those girls who are formally referred to the juvenile justice system are notably more likely than boys to be diverted from adjudication. Overall, 85% of girls were diverted from adjudication, compared to 73% of boys. This trend persisted across offense categories, with 82% of girls with misdemeanor offenses being diverted, compared to 71% of boys. Similarly, 81% of girls with felony offenses were diverted, while 66% of boys were. Notably, first-time-justice-involved girls also saw higher diversion rates, with 92% diverted from adjudication, compared to 84% of first-time-justice-involved boys.

**Boys account for the overwhelming share of admissions to residential placement and detention.**

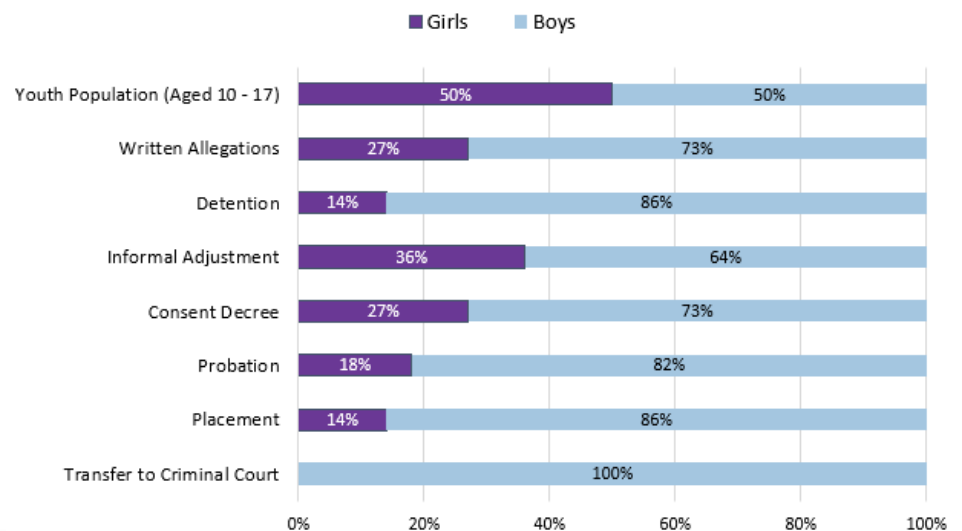
Finally, boys account for the overwhelming share of admissions to residential placement. Placement in a residential facility is one of the most serious dispositions that can be imposed for a youth. Generally, a youth should only be placed if they pose a serious threat to com-

munity protection. While the use of residential placement as a disposition has decreased nearly 70% over the last decade, boys continue to account for the largest share

of these placements. In 2023, 86% of residential placement admissions were boys, compared to just 14% of admissions for girls.

**No girls were transferred to criminal court in 2023.**

**Juvenile Justice Decision Point by Gender: 2023**



## 5

### Girls are less likely than boys to return to the juvenile justice system.

One of the primary goals of the Pennsylvania juvenile justice system is to ensure that all youth who are served by the system acquire the knowledge and skills that make it possible for them to become productive, connected, and law-abiding members of their communities, thus making them less likely to take part in ongoing delinquent behaviors.

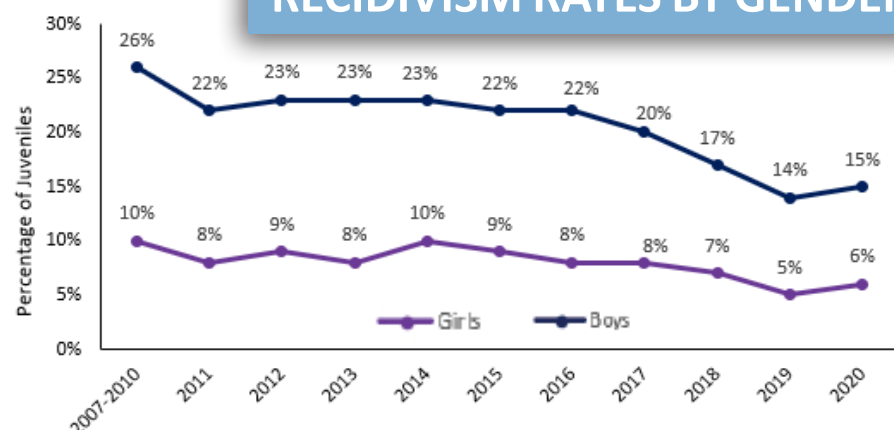
In general, the overwhelming majority of youth involved in the ju-

venile justice system are not on a pathway to a lifetime of crime, and most will age out of the delinquent behavior by the time they reach adulthood. Nationally, girls are even less likely than boys to continue delinquent behavior after their initial juvenile justice involvement, and this trend is true

in Pennsylvania as well. Since Pennsylvania began tracking recidivism rates, the average recidivism rate for girls has been 10% or less, and boys have consistently recidivated at a rate approximately 2.5 times higher than girls.

**Recidivism Defined:** Within two years of case closure, a subsequent adjudication of delinquency or conviction in criminal court for a felony or misdemeanor offense.

### RECIDIVISM RATES BY GENDER



## RECOMMENDATIONS

In this concluding section, we have identified practical recommendations for addressing the takeaways identified in this report.



### JUVENILE PROBATION DEPARTMENTS

- Establish criteria to increase the use of diversion, particularly for nonviolent and first-time offenders.
- Implement a mental health assessment, a trauma assessment, and a risk/needs assessment, ideally as close to intake as possible, to help identify the specific needs of each youth.
- Provide staff with training and resources on gender-based violence and ensure access to specialized services tailored to the unique needs of girls.
- Review data annually to monitor changes in the documented mental health, trauma, and criminogenic needs of girls and boys.
- Review service matrices annually to ensure programming is aligned with the documented needs of youth involved in the system.
- Evaluate contracted services to ensure a wide range of gender-responsive interventions and programs that align specifically with the documented needs of both the boys and girls under supervision.
- Establish memorandums of understanding with other youth-serving agencies (mental health, children and youth, schools) to better facilitate the exchange of youth-level case records for multi-system involved youth.
- Consider a specialized “girls only” probation officer position.

### YOUTH SERVICE PROVIDERS

- Prioritize programming that focuses on community-based diversion options that address the unique needs of girls.
- Create strategies to better involve families in girls’ justice programming.
- Implement gender-specific curricula and practices.
- Design gender-appropriate residential environments.
- Dedicate more attention and resources towards reentry/reintegration services for girls.
- Conduct an annual review of programming and support services for girls to assess their effectiveness, identify service gaps, and inform future improvements.
- Expand contracts and offer incentives to encourage partnerships with specialized programs that focus on the needs of girls, parenting youth, and adolescent health, ensuring targeted and effective service delivery.

### SCHOOL-BASED

- Ensure adequate mental health resources.
- Establish an understanding between schools and police that clearly delineates when and why schools will call police and when they will not call police (e.g., for low level infractions).
- Implement diversion and restorative practices in all schools to address school misbehavior, reserving punishment for extreme infractions.

- Re-examine zero tolerance policies, which are disciplinary policies that mandate predetermined, typically harsh consequences (e.g., suspension, expulsion, or arrest) for specific behaviors, regardless of the context, intent, or individual circumstances<sup>7</sup>. Common targets of zero tolerance policies include violence, weapons, drugs, defiance, disruptive behavior, and disrespect.
- Re-examine Codes of Conduct to promote gender neutrality, ensuring that expectations and consequences are applied equitably across genders. For example, clarify terms such as ‘disorderly conduct,’ which may be disproportionately applied to girls for behaviors like verbal outbursts, noncompliance, or perceived ‘attitude’.
- Designate emotional support classrooms within schools that are specifically available to girls and tailored to address their emotional and trauma-related needs.

## LAW ENFORCEMENT

- Encourage law enforcement and district attorneys to develop both pre-arrest and post-arrest/pre-referral diversion programming.
- Train all law enforcement on best practices related to deflection.

## OTHER

- Train all system staff in trauma-informed practices, techniques to address implicit biases, family engagement, gender-responsiveness, and conflict resolution.
- Support the accessibility of community resources and services, especially for law enforcement and other stakeholders at the front end of the juvenile justice system.
- Encourage the Pennsylvania Juvenile Justice & Delinquency Prevention Committee to examine and make recommendations regarding girls in the juvenile justice system.
- Facilitate regular cross-systems training to ensure juvenile probation officers, as well as staff from partner agencies (e.g., Children and Youth Services, Behavioral Health, and schools), are familiar with each other’s available resources.
- Support the consistent provision of gender-appropriate toiletries and personal care items for girls and offer youth-friendly healthcare tailored to their specific developmental and reproductive health needs.
- Consider the development of a Girls Court, to include a full range of gender-specific and strength-based programming with caseloads targeting female juvenile offenders.
- Engage youth with lived experience to collaborate on gender specific policies, programs, services, and interventions.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Juvenile Court Judges’ Commission. (2024). *2023 Juvenile Court Annual Report*. Pennsylvania Juvenile Court Judges’ Commission: Harrisburg, PA.

<sup>2</sup> Kerig, P. K., & Becker, S. P. (2010). Trauma and girls’ delinquency. *Journal of Child & Adolescent Trauma*, 3(1), 51–63.

<sup>3</sup> Underwood, L. A., & Washington, A. (2016). Mental illness and juvenile offenders. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 13(2), 228.

<sup>4</sup> Zahn, M., Agnew, R., Fishbein, D., Miller, S. Winn, D. M., Dakoff, G., Kruttschnitt, C., Giordano, P., Gottredson, D. C., Payne, A. A., Field, B. C., and Chesney-Lind, M. (2010). *Causes and correlates of girls’ delinquency*. Girls Study Group: Understanding and Responding to Girls’ Delinquency. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention: Washington, DC.

<sup>5</sup> Ehrmann, S., Hyland, N., & Puzzanchera. (2019). *Girls in the juvenile justice system*. Juvenile Justice Statistics: National Report Series Bulletin. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention: Washington, DC.

<sup>6</sup> Sherman, F. T., & Balck, A. (2015). *Gender injustice: System-level juvenile justice reforms for girls*. The National Crittenton Foundation: Portland, OR.

<sup>7</sup> School Discipline Support Initiative (2020). *Zero tolerance*. Available online: <https://supportiveschooldiscipline.org/>