

Juvenile Justice Staff Perspectives on Girls in Secure Detention

About This Project

During 2018 and 2019, the National Council on Crime and Delinquency (NCCD) and the Delores Barr Weaver Policy Center (Policy Center) took a close look at issues that girls face in secure juvenile detention in Florida. This project was supported by the Jessie Ball duPont Fund, the Delores Barr Weaver Fund at the Community Foundation for Northeast Florida, and the James and Joan Van Vleck Advised Fund.

This project was motivated by a previous multisite exploratory study on probation-involved girls in Florida, conducted by NCCD and the Policy Center, which found that non-law technical violations of probation (such as not going to school or missing curfew) played a significant role in girls receiving probation violations and being committed to residential lockup facilities. These findings propelled us to investigate what happens in Florida before a girl is placed on probation, including the reasons she is detained, with a focus on front-end opportunities for eliminating or reducing her juvenile justice system contact and the recurring use of detention while a girl is on probation.

As part of this project, NCCD and the Policy Center (the project team) published four research briefs to highlight key topics related to girls in detention.¹ This brief summarizes results from an online survey administered in the fall of 2018 to Florida Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ) staff across the



state to learn about staff perspectives on why girls are held in secure detention, needs of detained girls, alternatives to secure detention, and related topics.

About Our Organizations

NCCD (nccdglobal.org) promotes just and equitable social systems for individuals, families, and communities through research, public policy, and practice.

The Policy Center (seethegirl.org) engages communities, organizations, and individuals through quality research, community organizing, advocacy, training, and model programming to advance the rights of girls, young women, and youth who identify as female, especially those impacted by the justice system.



Survey Findings

Survey Sample

A total of 152 staff responded to the survey, representing probation (53%), detention centers (25%), and juvenile assessment centers (JACs, 22%). Respondents represented

Central (47%), North (43%), and South (10%) Florida. Most (68%) were female; 31% were male.* Of the female respondents, 46% identified as white, 35% as black/African American, 11% as Hispanic/Latina, 5% as multiracial, 1% as Asian, and 1% as Native American; 2% did not identify a race/ethnicity. Of the male respondents, 52% identified as white, 32% as black/African American, 5% as Hispanic/Latino, and 5% as multiracial; 7% did not identify a race/ethnicity.

Why Girls Are Locked Up in Secure Detention

Survey respondents reported that the most common reasons girls are held in secure detention include domestic violence charges, violation of probation, theft, substance use or possession, and assault (non-domestic). See Table 1. Respondents who selected "Other" frequently wrote in "absconding" or "running away" as reasons for detention.

Table 1: Common Reasons That Girls Are Held in Secure Detention
N = 150

Reason	n
Domestic violence charges	99
Violation of probation	87
Theft	69
Substance use or possession	66
Assault (other than domestic violence)	59
School conflicts/problems at school	47
Other	13
Weapons charges	10

* One respondent listed "self-identify" for gender.

Why Girls Return to Secure Detention

More than half (n=82, 56%) of 147 respondents reported that they frequently see the same girls returning to secure detention. When asked an open-ended question about why girls may return to secure detention, 65 (50%) of 131 respondents listed technical/non-law violations of probation (e.g., running away, not going to school, substance use), and 52 (40%) listed new law offenses (e.g., domestic violence, school incidents, theft, assault/battery). Other offenses/violations listed by

respondents included contempt of court, violating home detention, violation of court order, violation of drug court, and failure to appear (not shown).²

Detained Girls' Needs

Most frequently, staff reported that the needs of girls in secure detention include family-related services, counseling/mental health, substance abuse treatment, and victim services related to sex trafficking (Table 2).

Table 2: Needs of Girls in Secure Detention
N = 147

Type of Service/Need	n
Family support services	123
Counseling/mental health	120
Substance abuse treatment	93
Victims services (sex trafficking)	83
Basic needs assistance (food, clothing, personal items, etc.)	58
Educational assistance	56
Employment assistance/help with getting a job	54
Medication management/access to medication	49
Transportation	45
Pregnancy or parenting help	43
Health care/medical care	38
Housing—long term (transitional, permanent)	33
Housing—short term (shelter, respite)	27
Legal assistance	12
Other (included: anger management, confidence building, extracurricular activities, family counseling, mentoring, spiritual needs)	11

Respite Beds as An Alternative to Detention for Domestic Violence–Related Arrests

Domestic violence respite provides an alternative to detaining girls who are arrested for family conflicts. DJJ contracts with the nonprofit Florida Network of Youth and Family Services to coordinate the statewide respite program. Eligible youth are referred to short-term residential placements and services at one of 28 shelters.³

Survey respondents were asked if respite beds are available in their community for girls who would otherwise be held in secure detention for domestic violence-related offenses. About two fifths (42%) of respondents reported that respite beds exist in their community and that bed space is usually available, while slightly less than half (45%) described barriers to accessing respite beds including eligibility criteria, capacity, and availability (Table 3).

Survey respondents who selected “Other” provided the following write-in responses describing their local situation/experience regarding respite beds for girls charged with domestic violence.

- Available—but over an hour away.
- Beds are sometimes available, but if there are serious mental health issues/medication, they may be refused; parents will talk to the shelter, and shelter will refuse based on parent input.
- Parents must transport youth out of our county to place youth in a shelter for 14 to 21 days.
- Respite is available; however, there is a combination of full capacity and ineligibility for our area.
- Yes, but the specific criteria of the program make it hard to place youth into the beds.
- Youth mostly refuse respite but also are sometimes ineligible.

Table 3: Availability of Respite Beds for Girls Charged With Domestic Violence
N = 146

Response	%
Yes, and bed space is usually available	42%
Yes, but criteria often make girls ineligible	23%
Yes, but bed space is usually at full capacity	18%
Do not know	8%
Respite beds are not available in my community	4%
Other; see write-in responses above	5%
Total	100%



Perceptions of Racial Bias Across Juvenile Justice System Decision Points

Survey respondents were asked, “To what extent do you agree that racial bias contributes to disparities in outcomes at different points along the justice system for girls in your community?”⁴ As shown in Table 4, respondents were least likely to agree that racial bias occurs at the JAC intake process (23%) and more likely to agree that racial bias occurs at arrest (53%), court (41%), commitment (35%), and probation (34%) decision points.

Respondents who identified as black/African American had statistically significant higher agreement than white respondents that racial bias exists at all decision points (not shown; $p \leq .05$). In addition, the level of racial bias agreement varied by whether respondent was a juvenile probation officer (JPO), JAC staff member, or detention center staff member (not shown).

Table 4: Contribution of Racial Bias to System Disparities for Girls at Key Decision Points

Decision Point	Agree		N
	n	%	
Arrest (e.g., law enforcement decision to arrest)	73	53%	137
Intake/Detention (e.g., JAC intake decision to detain)	31	23%	135
Court (e.g., judge decision to adjudicate delinquent or placement decision)	55	41%	133
Probation (e.g., JPO decision to violate)	45	34%	134
Commitment (e.g., state attorney or DJJ commitment manager decision to recommend residential placement)	47	35%	134

Recommended Changes to Policy or Practice Related to Secure Detention

Respondents were asked an open-ended question about what policy or practice they would change related to secure detention and why. The project team coded each of the 91 recommended policy

changes that respondents identified into one of nine key themes (Table 5). Recommendations ranged from policies that would reduce/limit the use of detention to ones that would increase availability of services to ones that would expand or increase the use of detention.

**Table 5: Recommended Changes to Policy or Practice Related to Secure Detention
N = 107**

Theme	Examples	n
Policy would expand/increase detention admissions (negative impact on youth)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Allow more crimes to be eligible for secure detention to send a clear message right away. It needs to be stricter. Youth go into secure detention sometimes because they like it in there versus home. They need to be deterred. 	18
Specific to legislation or policy (e.g., prolific juvenile offender law, separation of male and female policy)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No youth under age 12 shall be held in secure detention unless for certain charges. Repeal rule requiring all committed offenders to be held until placed. 	16
No change needed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There are no changes I can think of at this time. I wouldn't change anything. 	11
Provide treatment and services in detention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Offer more mental health services to all youth while they stay in detention I would ensure that youth are receiving services while in detention, even if it is for a short period of time. 	10
Other	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Being able to take youth in secure detention out for community work, the ones that have a GED or need to complete community service. Detention is so far away from [our county]. Our youth need to be held closer to home so parents can transport their medication. 	10

Theme	Examples	n
Policy would limit/reduce detention admissions (positive impact on youth) or alternatives to detention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Domestic violence—if a bed is not available at [provider X] for some reason, the youth will be detained. • Not to use secure detention for probation violations. Should not be used for punishment; find alternative creative sanctions in lieu of secure detention. 	9
Availability of services/reentry, transitional, skills, family	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More support when youth are out in the community so they won't re-offend. • Provide better aftercare programs; follow up with youth after being released from detention; better supervision of youth on probation. 	7
Legal rights/Due process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Better education of the youth and families about the legal system. I don't think they truly understand anything about it or their rights. • Kids not getting phone calls for free . . . kids need a way to talk to their parents. A lot [of parents/caregivers] don't have the money or won't send them any. 	6
Staffing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keep female guards with [girls] and males with [boys] as much as possible. A lot of [girls] are not comfortable with [male guards] due to sexual assault issues, general abuse, etc. • The rate for turnover is very high. Staff is often overworked which results in a negative outcome. Sometimes due to the issues described above, the waiting time to see a juvenile in secure [detention] can be over an hour. 	4

Conclusion

The survey findings provide an opportunity to incorporate perspectives of staff working with juvenile justice-involved girls in Florida into policy and practice discussions at the community and state levels. The findings also offer insight into staff perceptions about the needs of detained girls, such

as family-related services, mental health, substance abuse treatment, and victim services related to sex trafficking. In addition, the findings could inform training opportunities to help reduce the use of secure detention for girls (on topics such as racial bias, alternatives to detention, etc.).

Endnotes

¹ NCCD and Delores Barr Weaver Policy Center. (2019). *Girls in secure detention in Florida. Authors; NCCD and Delores Barr Weaver Policy Center. (2019). Notes to the field: Girls and secure juvenile detention; barriers, opportunities, and recommendations.* Authors; Patino Lydia, V., & Glesmann, C. (2019). *Addressing barriers to using respite beds for girls charged with domestic violence.* Delores Barr Weaver Policy Center and NCCD.

² A respondent could list more than one reason that girls return to detention, and one respondent's reasons could fall into both main categories: (1) technical violation of probation and (2) new law offense.

³ Florida Network of Youth and Family Services. (2018). *Domestic violence respite.* <https://floridanetwork.org/programs/domestic-violence-respite/>

⁴ The survey included a statement that racial bias refers to attitudes, perceptions, or stereotypes that affect decision making.