

THE BOSTON FOUNDATION COMMUNITY SAFETY INITIATIVE

In 2002, the Boston Foundation launched an Initiative to promote safety in Boston neighborhoods. The Community Safety Initiative seeks to reduce violent crime in Boston neighborhoods by maintaining collaborations and relationships among the key actors in the field (e.g., police, corrections agencies, neighborhood-based organizations, faith-based groups, etc.). It also addresses crime-related activities of high risk individuals, especially youth, and promotes reduction of the cultural tolerance of violence. The Community Safety Initiative accomplishes its goals through three types of activities: grantmaking; research and policy advocacy; and community convenings/discussions.

One component of this work is a series of Community Forums hosted by the Boston Foundation during 2003 and 2004. The discussions explore the nature of timely public safety issues, their impact on community life and public policy, and the potential for concerted action. Representatives of community groups, law enforcement organizations and a variety of public agencies join other interested citizens to learn about the issues. These forums are co-sponsored by the Gardiner Howland Shaw Foundation and coordinating partners MassINC and the Crime and Justice Institute.

Girls in Crisis: Overview and Forum

The number of girls at-risk for multiple social problems as well as juvenile justice system involvement is on the rise in our communities. Girls are using alcohol and other drugs at younger ages (National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse, 2003; Center for Substance Abuse Prevention, 2001), engaging in risky sexual behaviors at an alarming rate, committing more violent crimes, and an increasing number of girls are becoming involved in the juvenile justice system. Why are more and more girls engaging in risky behaviors, and what can our community do to help them? These questions were the focus of a community safety forum held at the Boston Foundation on June 6, 2003. This forum, coordinated by the Crime and Justice Institute, was the second in a series of community forums sponsored by the Boston Foundation and The Gardiner Howland Shaw Foundation.

The forum, “Girls in Crisis: The Challenge for Our Community” began with opening remarks from Rev. Gloria White-Hammond, M.D., a pediatrician at South End Community Health Center and co-pastor of the Bethel AME Church. These remarks were followed by a keynote presentation from Francine Sherman, J.D., Director of the Juvenile Rights Advocacy Project and Boston College Law School professor on girls in the juvenile justice system. Rev. White-Hammond then moderated a panel discussion that included: Lewis H. (Harry) Spence, Commissioner of the Massachusetts Department of Social Services (DSS); Joan Wallace-Benjamin, President and CEO of The Home for Little Wanderers; Detective Lisa Holmes, Sexual Assault Unit in the Boston Police Department; Mary Ellen Mastroilli, Deputy Superintendent of the Suffolk County Sheriff’s Department; Valerie Johnson, Director of Girls Programming at the Ella J. Baker House; and Fabiola Jerome, a former Department of Youth Services (DYS)

consumer. A 30-minute Question and Answer session with the audience followed the panel discussion.

Girls in Crisis – Key Themes

“I was involved with DSS and then DYS when I was 13years old.... I went from foster home to foster home, didn’t get any special attention or guidance while I was there and was placed out of my environment so I had reason to run away...” Fabiola Jerome, Forum Panelist

Francine Sherman’s keynote address focused on the research on girls involved with the juvenile justice system. In particular, she discussed the rising number of girls involved with juvenile justice system, and the characteristics of these girls.

Some highlights from her presentation include:

- Girls are the fastest growing segment within the juvenile justice system and are entering the system at younger ages. The number of girls currently committed to the Massachusetts Department of Youth Services (DYS) is four times greater than the number committed in 1993. These trends are even more pronounced within minority communities. In Suffolk County, African American girls represented 50% of DYS female commitments in April 2001 and 67% in April 2003.
- School failure is a clear pathway for girls into the juvenile justice system. Studies have found that negative attitudes towards school along with school failure are powerful predictors of delinquency in girls.
- Many system-involved girls leave the juvenile justice system without resources or support to help them in their transition. For example, many girls do not have high school degrees, a job, or a place to live when leave the juvenile justice system at age 18.
- Girls in the juvenile justice system frequently have trauma histories and a history of involvement with the child welfare system. They have often experienced physical, emotional, and/or sexual abuse; and many suffer from physical and/or mental illnesses. These girls also frequently come from unstable, chaotic homes with families coping with poverty, death, violence and/or multigenerational patterns of incarceration and victimization.
- Many system-involved girls have a history of multiple home transitions prior to entering the juvenile justice system, and this pattern of residential instability is continued during their involvement with the juvenile justice system. One study found that chronically delinquent girls had an average of 16 home transitions, more than one home transition for each year of their life. Running away from residential placements is one reason for the residential instability in system-involved girls’ lives. When a girl runs away from a foster home she often does not return to the same home when she returns, instead she is placed in a different foster home.

Girls in the juvenile justice system are just a snapshot of the girls in the community. Many girls not involved with the juvenile justice or child welfare system are also struggling with many similar problems and will continue down a path towards system involvement unless some type of intervention occurs.

Community-wide Symptoms of Girls in Crisis

“...Our culture has a case of Attention Deficit Disorder [when it comes to our children] and we have only recently discovered that our kids are home alone. One solution is simply to go home.”
Gloria White-Hammond , Forum Moderator

Girls today are growing up in communities that lack a “sense of community.” Sense of community is defined as “a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members needs will be met through their commitment to be together” (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). This is best reflected in the lack of an adult presence in many girls’ lives. Many girls feel as though no one cares about them, and many don’t have a family member, concerned neighbor, or clergy member to talk to about their problems. These feelings of isolation are often the basis for many types of risky behaviors. For example, adolescent substance use is often associated with a weak connection to family and school (CSAP, 2001).

Additionally, there is a lack of resources for girls in the community who need help coping with their problems. As a result many of these girls end up in the juvenile justice system. For example, forum panelist, Det. Lisa Holmes discussed the issue of limited resources for girls who have been victimized and stated, “It’s unfortunate that sometimes the only way we can get our young girls any help is to mandate them to the criminal justice system”. Francine Sherman further explained, “We need to build connections between the juvenile justice system, community-based service providers, and law enforcement agencies to provide alternatives to incarceration for these girls.”

Intervention Points

“Several systems have failed these young women before they get to DYS. There’s been the system of their family... the system of community... and the system of schools that have failed them...There are a lot of places, bumps in the road...avenues for intervention that were missed...”
Valerie Johnson, Forum Panelist

Many girls had difficulties long before they became involved with the juvenile justice system. Intervening with these girls when they first start to experience difficulties can prevent many of them from entering the juvenile justice system. For example, schools are often the first place where difficulties arise for girls, and academic failure is common among girls involved with the juvenile justice system. Providing services at this early stage can help ensure that these girls get the help they need before their problems escalate. Additionally, many girls in crisis frequently have medical and/or mental health issues and receive services from many different medical and human service providers. Coordinating services among these different service providers can help ensure that these girls get help to prevent them from continuing down the path to juvenile justice system involvement.

Interventions focused on girls already involved with the juvenile justice system may prevent some of them from becoming involved with the adult criminal justice system. Many of these girls come from families involved with the adult criminal justice system. Deputy Superintendent Mary-Ellen Mastrorilli explained that “the children of offenders are six times more likely to engage in future criminality themselves.” This multi-generational cycle of crime can be broken by providing community-based services to girls involved with juvenile justice system. For example, stable residential placements; programs that foster long-term relationships with adults; and the development of a network of support for girls through wrap-around services that provide support and resources when they leave the juvenile justice system, all can help to break the multigenerational cycle of crime.

Girls in Crisis – Opportunities for Action

“Truth is when we listen we know how to do it [help children] well, we know how to do it right.”
Lewis H. (Harry) Spence, Forum Panelist

- Relational needs of girls are important and need to be addressed

Relationships are central to every child’s development. One of the most important factors in preventing violence, risky sexual behavior, and alcohol and other drug use in girls is a long-term relationship with a caring adult (CSAP, 2001). Thus, ensuring these types of relationships for at-risk girls and girls already involved with juvenile justice system should be a priority for decision-makers. As mentioned earlier, at-risk girls are often not connected to their communities, and this is often worse for system-involved girls. Once girls are involved with the juvenile justice system, they don’t have many opportunities to make long-term relationships with community members.

- Empower girls and build on their strengths

Many system-involved girls have little self-esteem. Forum panelist, Valerie Johnson explained, “System-involved girls identify themselves as a systems kid and it’s difficult for them to see themselves as something else...as someone with a future and someone that can begin to turn their lives around.” Self-esteem is also an issue for many at-risk girls not involved with the juvenile justice system. Appropriate community-based interventions for girls that empower them and build on their strengths can prevent many of them from becoming involved with the juvenile justice system, and can help break the multi-generational cycle of criminality common in families of system-involved girls. Characteristics of community-based programs found to be most effective with at-risk and system-involved girls are: gender-specific; strength-based; developmentally sound; and culturally sensitive (OJJDP, 1998).

- Provide prosocial activities to girls in their communities

Both system and non-system-involved girls need access to prosocial activities located within their communities. Involvement in groups such as the Boys and Girls Club, 4-H club, Girl Scouts, and sports leagues provide girls with support within their community. These groups provide access to caring adults and peers not involved with the juvenile

justice system. They also help girls build on their strengths and for system-involved provide them with an identity separate from their juvenile justice system involvement.

- Increase collaboration and communication between juvenile justice agencies and community-based service providers

Increasing collaboration and communication among these agencies can help integrate the often fragmented service delivery systems (i.e., mental health, public health, educational, medical, etc.) needed to serve both at-risk and system-involved girls. These collaborations can help connect girls with resources in their communities, and provide them with opportunities to establish lasting relationships with adults. Communities have the resources to sustain girls over long periods of time even into adulthood. For example, faith-based organizations can build relationships with system-involved girls while they are in institutions and continue those relationships long after the girl has been released from an institution back into the community. Additionally, faith-based organizations can develop relationships with the families of these girls and serve a support network for both. Linking community-based service providers and juvenile justice agencies also supports community-based agencies by increasing their visibility and encouraging their use among girls.

- Increase the number of stable housing placements for system-involved girls in their communities and decrease the use of residential placements

Stable housing is an essential component to creating stability in the lives of system-involved girls, and stability is necessary to stop the multi-generational cycle of criminality in many families. Residential instability decreases girls' capacity for long-term relationships with adults. The cycle of being placed in multiple foster homes, running away, and for many girls being locked in secure residential institutions, diminishes the relationships they are able to make with adults in their communities and often validates their feelings that no one cares about them. Stable housing fosters the development of long-term relationships enabling these girls to form ties to their community which can help support them when they leave the juvenile justice system.

Conclusion

The number of girls in crisis is rising in our communities. An increasing number of girls are engaging in risky behaviors that range from substance use to violent crime. As a result, more and more girls are becoming involved with the juvenile justice system and often at younger ages than in the past. Community-based interventions are needed to address the growing needs of these girls in crisis, and to prevent many of them from becoming involved with the justice system. Girls involved in the juvenile justice system often had many problems prior to their justice system involvement and frequently received services from many different service providers. Many of these girls received services related to academic failures, mental health issues, and/or medical problems. It is essential that communities begin to start paying attention girls displaying these warning signs to prevent them from continuing down the path towards juvenile justice system involvement. Providing intensive services to a girl who is experiencing academic

difficulties along with mental health issues can prevent a downward spiral into criminal behavior and justice system involvement.

For girls already involved with the juvenile justice system, improvements are needed in the services they receive. These girls need stable housing located within their communities to provide them with opportunities to develop long-term relationships with caring adults. Many of these girls feel isolated, lack a lasting connection to a caring adult, and many do not know how to ask for help. These girls also need access to prosocial activities (i.e., Boys and Girls Club, 4-H, Girl Scouts, sports leagues, etc.) which help them establish connections to their communities and develop relationships with peers not involved with the juvenile justice system. Intervening with these girls at this stage can prevent many of them from becoming involved with the adult criminal justice system and break the inter-generational cycle of crime frequently present in their families.

References

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