

THE SIGNS ARE THERE: GIRLS AND JUVENILE JUSTICE IN WAYNE COUNTY

In 1899, a group of reformers concerned about the care and treatment of children in the justice system began the juvenile justice system that is the basis of what we see today. Their emphasis was on rehabilitation, accountability, and the special circumstances of youth. More than 100 years later, we are concerned with these same issues but argue that there are now gender-specific concerns that must be addressed when assessing treatment, community safety, and fairness.

Nationally, we have seen an increase in the number of adolescent females entering the juvenile justice system — a system modeled on male offending and subsequent rehabilitation and/or punishment options and alternatives. Girls' experiences, however, are often different from those of their male counterparts. Many girls in the juvenile justice system share certain characteristics and experiences:¹

- Experiences of physical, psychological, and sexual abuse
- Family fragmentation due to serious and multiple stressors including poverty, loss, violence, and/or a multi-generational pattern of incarceration
- Serious mental and/or physical problems
- Poor educational experiences including suspension/expulsion from school, repeating one or more grades, and placement in special classrooms
- Institutional bias in the processing and handling of their cases resulting in placements in settings and facilities that are too restrictive and that do not address their unique needs for intervention, treatment, and rehabilitation
- Once they enter the juvenile justice system, vulnerability to physical and sexual abuse that sometimes is worse than what they experienced in their homes and communities

The growth in the number of girls in the juvenile justice system may be due to a number of factors and not just an increase in girls' aggressive and violent behavior. Rather, preliminary research suggests that the re-labeling of girls' conflicts with their families as violent offenses, the changes in police arrest practices and procedures regarding domestic violence and aggressive

The data and information in this report were compiled by staff of the Skillman Center for Children, College of Urban, Labor and Metropolitan Affairs, Wayne State University; the Institute for Social Research University of Michigan, and members of the Wayne County Female Services Advisory Committee. Questions or comments should be directed to the Skillman Center for Children.



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**Wayne County Female
Services Advisory
Committee:**

A collaborative whose mission is to identify, develop and/or coordinate integrated gender-sensitive services and advocate for a juvenile justice system responsive to the needs of girls and their families.