


[ABOUT US \(/ABOUT-US\)](#)
[CORE PRINCIPLES \(/CORE-POSITIONS/GUIDING-PRINCIPLES\)](#)
[OUR WORK \(/OUR-WORK\)](#)
[Home \(/\)](#) »

[FEDERAL POLICY \(/FEDERAL-POLICY\)](#)
[EVENTS \(/EVENTS\)](#)
[NEWS & RESOURCES \(/NEWS-RESOURCES\)](#)

## #YJAM: Giving Girls the Supports They Need to Lead Safe and Healthy Lives

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During the month of October – National Youth Justice Awareness Month – I had the opportunity to travel with Tanya, Maui, Breana, and Cassandra, four women formerly involved with the juvenile justice system in West Virginia, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Southern, California. Their ages range from early twenties to late thirties – bridging decades and spanning the city streets of Los Angeles to the Appalachian Mountains. We were traveling together to conferences, roundtables and strategy sessions to advocate for juvenile justice reform focused on the needs of girls. These four women were so different and yet they shared strikingly similar experiences.

Two of the them ran away from home for the first time when they were seven years old – fleeing homes rife with violence and abuse. All of them are survivors of sexual, physical, and emotional abuse, and other forms of family dysfunction. Before the age of 16, they were all detained for status offenses such as running away, truancy, and unruly behavior – detained, handcuffed, and shackled at the ankles.

According to the [Coalition for Juvenile Justice's](http://www.juvjustice.org) (<http://www.juvjustice.org>) issue brief, "[Girls, Status Offenses And The Need For A Less Punitive And More Empowering Approach](http://www.juvjustice.org/sites/default/files/resource-files/SOS%20Project%20-%20Girls,%20Status%20Offenses%20and%20the%20Need%20for%20a%20Less%20Punitive%20and%20More%20Empowering%20Approach.pdf)" (<http://www.juvjustice.org/sites/default/files/resource-files/SOS%20Project%20-%20Girls,%20Status%20Offenses%20and%20the%20Need%20for%20a%20Less%20Punitive%20and%20More%20Empowering%20Approach.pdf>), "a disproportionate number of the status offenses petitioned in the courts every year are brought against girls. Between 1995 and 2009, the number of petitioned cases for curfew violations for girls grew by 23% versus only 1% for boys. The number of petitioned cases for liquor law violations for girls grew by 41% versus only 6% for boys.

What the statistics don't reveal is that girls cope with the dangerous, damaging and traumatic circumstances in their lives as best they can in the context of their lives. But the reality is that their "adaptive coping behaviors," including running away from homes where violence is prevalent, self medication with drugs and alcohol, truancy and unruly behavior, are the very same behaviors that put them at risk of entering the juvenile justice system because they are detained for a status offense. In other words, we criminalize them for coping behaviors that are actually signs of strength and resiliency against the abuse and neglect they have experienced. What is the result? A system that fails to help the girls get the support they need to recover from the abuse and neglect they experienced long before they entered the system: a system that must change.

The recently released comprehensive report [Gender Injustice](http://www.nationalcrittenton.org/gender-injustice/) (<http://www.nationalcrittenton.org/gender-injustice/>), written by Francine Sherman and Annie Balck about girls in the juvenile justice system reminds us that while changes have been made to more effectively meet the needs of girls in or at risk of entering the system, we have a long way to go. The report highlights the harsh truth that the factors that drive girls into the system, like sexual and physical abuse, have not changed during the last twenty years. It emphasizes that the vast majority of girls impacted by the juvenile justice system are no threat to public safety but are victims reacting to the reality of their lives.

Tanya, Maui, Cassandra, and Breana are all advocates working to ensure that the girls that come after them get the support they need rather than being criminalized for their efforts to survive. As leaders for change they teach us that working in collaboration, speaking truth to power, and putting a human face to the data can catalyze transformation.

Join me in standing with them! Here are a few things you can do to take action.

1. Share [Gender Injustice](http://www.nationalcrittenton.org/gender-injustice/) (<http://www.nationalcrittenton.org/gender-injustice/>) with your networks, as the most comprehensive and up to date report it provides excellent background, findings, and recommendations for change.
2. Forward the recently released, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, "[Policy Guidance on Girls in the Juvenile Justice System](http://www.ojjdp.gov/policyguidance/girls-juvenile-justice-system/)" ([http://www.ojjdp.gov/policyguidance/girls-juvenile-justice-system/?utm\\_source=juvjust102815&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_content=girls&utm\\_campaign=juvjust&ed2f26df2d9c416fbddddd2330a778c6=tecikuhkj-tkcjxujl](http://www.ojjdp.gov/policyguidance/girls-juvenile-justice-system/?utm_source=juvjust102815&utm_medium=email&utm_content=girls&utm_campaign=juvjust&ed2f26df2d9c416fbddddd2330a778c6=tecikuhkj-tkcjxujl)) to advocates and state juvenile justice officials.
3. Monitor the release and support the passage of the long overdue reauthorization of the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act.



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*Jeannette Pai-Espinoza assumed Leadership of The National Crittenton Foundation (TNCF) in January of 2007. She brings over forty years of experience in advocacy, education, public policy, strategic communication, program development, and direct service delivery. She is currently: Chair of the National Foster Care Coalition and the Co-Director of the National Girls Initiative – Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention at the U. S. Department of Justice. She serves on the board of the Human Rights Project for Girls, and the hope & grace fund (philosophy, inc.). In 2013, she was recognized with the Robert F. Kennedy Embracing the Legacy award for her work supporting the empowerment of girls and young women in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems.*

[FEDERAL POLICY \(/FEDERAL-POLICY\)](#)

[EVENTS \(/EVENTS\)](#)

[NEWS & RESOURCES \(/NEWS-RESOURCES\)](#)

### Our Mission

The Coalition for Juvenile Justice (CJJ) envisions a nation where fewer children are at risk of delinquency; and if they are at risk or involved with the justice system, they and their families receive every possible opportunity to live safe, healthy and fulfilling lives.

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