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Op-Ed: On Girls Justice Day, Foundation Asks if Females Are "Invisible" in System

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by [Jeannette Pai-Espinosa \(http://www.chicago-bureau.org/author/jeanettepaiespinoza/\)](http://www.chicago-bureau.org/author/jeanettepaiespinoza/), 23/10/2015 0
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Today, October 23rd is Girls Justice Day and as it approached I kept thinking about the girls and young women who I have come to know over the last few years, who are or were involved with the Juvenile Justice system.

Their stories are as diverse as they are, but one thing that remains constant is the way in which their early lives have been shaped for them by abuse, neglect, violence and the betrayal of their trust by the very people whose job it was to love and protect them. Their experiences are unthinkable to most of us and yet it is essential that we see them not as victims or "bad girls" but as courageous and resilient survivors that need support in order to heal.

You can get to know some of them on our website (<http://www.nationalcrittenton.org/stories/>).

Girls are an invisible part of the juvenile justice system but sadly their numbers have increased steadily over the past several decades, rising from 17 percent in 1980 to 29 percent in 2011. Most of these girls, up to 73 percent, have histories of physical and sexual violence, which precedes their entry into the criminal and juvenile justice system.

A study of 319 girls in the juvenile justice system in Florida found that 64 percent reported past abuse, including 37 percent reporting abuse by a parent; 55 percent reporting abuse by someone other than a parent; and 27 percent reporting both types of abuse.

Compounding their exposure to violence and abuse is the fact that girls are more likely than boys to be arrested for "status offenses" and often receive more severe punishment than boys. Status offenses are behaviors that would not be considered offenses at the age of majority, such as skipping school, running away, breaking curfew and possession or use of alcohol.

Girls who are in the Juvenile Justice system need gender-responsive, trauma-informed services to heal from the violence and toxic stress they have experienced.

The Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act (JJDP) has provided direction and support for state juvenile justice system improvements and has significantly contributed to the reduction of juvenile crime and delinquency. Of particular importance to girls is support of the "deinstitutionalization of status offenders" or "DSO provision." The JJDP also requires states to assess how their juvenile justice programs are serving girls and taking steps to implement gender responsive plans to better serve them. So make a difference today by encouraging Congress to reauthorize the JJDP at increased funding levels...really, it's the least we can do. [Click here \(http://ow.ly/q1IE8\)](http://ow.ly/q1IE8) to sign the petition.

Just imagine for a minute how you would feel and what you would do if you learned that your child had been the victim of abuse – wouldn't you do everything in your power to make sure they received the support they needed and to advocate for justice? Now imagine that you are the child and you have no where and no one to go to..... Take action, make a difference, don't let girls in juvenile justice be invisible.

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Jeannette Pai-Espinosa is the President of The National Crittenton Foundation.

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