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First Problem Is Seeing Abused Girls As 'Bad Girls'

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The numbers tell us three sobering facts about girls and juvenile justice. First, they tell us that the percentage of girls in the juvenile justice system has steadily increased over the decades, rising from 17 percent in 1980 to 29 percent in 2011. Second, girls are more likely than boys to be arrested for "status offenses" – behaviors that would not be considered offenses at the age of majority – and often receive more severe punishment than boys. Third, victimization of girls typically precedes their involvement with the system.

What the numbers fail to reveal is the story behind the statistics. For example, Tanya was physically and emotionally abused by her mother on a regular basis

and was also repeatedly sexually abused by her mother's boyfriends and male friends. In an effort to get help, Tanya told her mother about the sexual abuse but was told that it was her fault.

To escape her life – the pain, betrayal and abuse – she continually ran away, taking refuge on the streets. Eventually, she was picked up and detained for running away. In court, her mother told the judge that Tanya was incorrigible. She was placed in a secure juvenile detention facility. Tanya's experience mirrors that of many of the girls who end up in the juvenile justice system. Detained for status offenses for actions that were cries for help, not criminal behaviors, Tanya's time in juvenile detention only served to further traumatize her.

In 2011, 35.8 percent of detained girls were detained for status offenses (http://www.ojjdp.gov/ojstatbb/ezacjrp/) and technical violations of probation as compared to 21.9 percent of boys. Simply put, behaviors such as running away, breaking curfew, skipping school and possession or use of alcohol places girls at increased risk of entering the juvenile justice system. For the vast majority of these girls who pose no threat to the public, the juvenile justice system is a harmful intervention, retraumatizing them and reducing their opportunities for positive development. Girls who enter the system because they are detained for a status offense often fall deeper into the system rather than getting the support they need to change their lives.

Like many girls who enter the juvenile justice system, Tanya didn't need to be detained. What she needed was a safe and caring environment where she could begin the process of learning to trust and to build positive relationships. But perhaps most of all she needed therapeutic services to help her heal from the trauma created by repeated physical, emotional and sexual abuse and the betrayal it signified. According to the Survey of Youth in Residential Placement (https://syrp.org/images/Youth_Needs_and_Services.pdf), 42 percent of girls in custody reported past physical abuse, 44 percent reported past suicide attempts and 35 percent reported past sexual abuse.

Tanya has a high ACE score; what does this mean? The Adverse Childhood Experiences (http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/acestudy/) (ACE) data provides us with insight into the impact of childhood exposure to abuse, neglect and household dysfunction before age 18. Scores range from 0-10 with increasing likelihood of further victimization, chronic disease, addiction, poor work performance and more — including a reduction of life expectancy. Understanding ACE helps us to more clearly define the challenges and root causes of the involvement of girls and boys in the juvenile justice system, though females tend to have higher scores than males.

In a recently released article (http://www.journalofjuvjustice.org/JOJJ0302/article01.htm), "The Prevalence of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) in the Lives of Juvenile Offenders" in the Journal of Juvenile Justice, "Disturbingly high rates of ACEs" were found in 64,329 juvenile offenders in Florida – 27 percent of males and 45 percent of females reported five or more ACEs.

Similarly, in a sample administration of ACE in 18 states through Crittenton agencies, 62 percent of girls who had involvement with the juvenile justices system had a score of 4 or more, with 4 percent having scores of 10. But the importance of ACE is not the level of adversity. The real story is the resilience and courage of the youth who survive and thrive. Early assessment and the provision of support and mental health services leverages their internal strengths and assets. We need to focus more on healing and less on detention.

Why didn't they just call one of their relatives or friends to let them know what was really going in their lives, or why didn't they ask for help sooner? Well, you would think it would be that simple, but from their perspective it isn't.

In our society, there is a deep underlying presence of age-old social gender role expectations. Girls should be "sugar and spice and everything nice." The consequence for not meeting those gender role expectations is to be labeled for life "a bad girl" and have your trauma criminalized.

This label stops them from asking for help or speaking the truth. It stops them from standing up for themselves, using their oh so powerful voice and letting their light shine. Why? Because deep inside they are internalizing this "bad girl" image and something tells them it might be true. And the way that our societal systems are organized reinforces that it is indeed true.

So what is the solution? How can public policy responses strengthen the ability to get girls the help they need to heal from the trauma they have experienced as children? Taken together, the steps below would provide an excellent starting point to shift the conversation from how to deal with "bad girls" to one that recognizes the strength and resiliency of girls so they can get the support they need. These steps include:

- Promote universal assessment for girls and boys involved in the juvenile justice system to better understand their exposure to violence, abuse and neglect.
- Advocate that girls in or at risk of entering the juvenile justice system receive gender and culturally responsive,
 trauma-informed, developmentally appropriate services to heal from the violence and abuse they have
 experienced.
- Push for the reauthorization of the Juvenile Justice Delinquency Prevention Act, with a focus on preventing detention for status offenses and the importance of gender-responsive and trauma-informed services.
- Endorse and advance the important work of organizations like the Coalition for Juvenile Justice and the National Standards for the Care of Youth Charged with Status Offenses (http://www.juvjustice.org/our-work/safety-opportunity-and-success-project/national-standards-care-youth-charged-status).

The reality is: This is the "easy" stuff. Passing legislation and advancing standards only takes the stroke of a pen or changing the words in policy guidance. But, in the end, negative attitudes and assumptions about girls will undermine the best of intentions. The "bad girl" image will continue to thrive and we will fail to support girls in breaking

destructive cycles of abuse and neglect. As a society and as individuals we need to think about whether we see girls and young women in the juvenile justice system as "bad girls."

Do we understand that their behaviors of acting out and being out of control are really their way of coping with experiences that are unthinkable to us? Can we meet them where they are rather than where we think they should be?

Today, Tanya – seen by many people throughout her life as a "bad girl" – reflects back and describes the support she eventually received as a "...bridge to a different kind of life." She goes on to share,

"I had no way of knowing at the time, that self-love would be something that I would have to first learn that I was missing, and then fight like heck to reclaim it in order to be happy ... I have come to learn that life and its successes unfold incrementally, so that in each moment we can see some measure of success. Some days this may simply mean that I decide to keep moving forward, on other days, I may have honored my personal truth a little more. Healing does not EVER happen overnight, but incremental success does."

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