

Paying Attention to Girls in the System

The results of the Amicus Girls Study were a little like the girls themselves: frustrating, sobering, and ultimately inspiring

Any parent of a teenage girl can relate. At some point in even the best relationships, the question comes up in a mother's or father's mind: "What am I doing wrong?" Those involved with girls in Minnesota's juvenile justice system sometimes find themselves going through a similar self-inventory. Some professionals tend to believe it's just easier to work with boys.

But what about the other side of the relationship? Many girls in the system feel they don't have a voice: that people are viewing them more as the embodiment of their destructive behavior rather than as individuals with insights and opinions that should be heard.

Despite the efforts of thousands of dedicated service providers, girls in Minnesota's juvenile justice system have endured many hardships. When compared to boys, research shows that girls have:

- experienced more significant sexual abuse and trauma history;
- engaged in more risky sexual behavior;
- experienced more significant physical and mental health problems;
- engaged in more self-defeating behaviors, including running away and skipping school.

The Amicus Girls Study originated from a simple idea: Ask those involved with girls in our juvenile justice system to share their thoughts on how the system is doing. We went directly to those who are working with the issues on the front lines: the corrections and social work professionals, the guardians, and those who possess a rarely-heard voice in juvenile justice: the girls themselves. As an epilogue of sorts, we also took time to ask women incarcerated in the Shakopee Correctional Facility what happened in their lives and how we might learn from their experiences to inform our work with the girls of today and tomorrow.

The Girls Study included information gathered from over 220 individuals through focus groups and targeted interviews of professionals, caregivers, girls, and women prisoners, as well as a review of local and national studies and data.

In the past few years, the number of girls entering the juvenile justice system has increased at a faster pace than that of boys, and the trend continues. In 2007, 33.5 % of the juveniles arrested in Minnesota were girls, almost 15,000 that year. Girls also represent over 44 % of Minnesota's out-of-home placement population—over 6,500 girls in 2007. Resources for gender-informed corrections programs have not kept pace with this expanding demand.

The girls themselves expressed a deep need to be "listened to and heard," adding that their complete story doesn't always get told. They feel that many in the justice system don't communicate directly with them.

Juvenile justice professionals from metro counties were dissatisfied with the options available for girls who need more care. Many professionals felt such girls were often ill-served by being sent out-of-home or even out-of-state.

Despite such concerns, it is important to note that our state has made great progress in understanding Minnesota's girls in the juvenile justice system. We acknowledge the stirring ideas and the inspiring dedication of those who built the foundation for gender-based approaches in Minnesota.

In the continuing tradition of those ideas, policymakers and direct service providers want to do the best they can for Minnesota's girls. This report is offered as a tool to help assess current systems, inspire future improvements, and inform and develop staff working in this field.



The Amicus Girls Study

- Participation from over 220 individuals, including corrections and social work professionals, caregivers, women in Shakopee Correctional Facility and the girls themselves.
- 32 focus groups and additional individual interviews at 15 sites across Minnesota.
- Conducted over a time period of nearly two years.
- Collaboration with the Women Offenders Task Force and the Interagency Adolescent Female Subcommittee.
- Designed with consultation from the Girls Study Advisory Team including national experts on gender responsive services.

Amicus Girls Study: *Executive Summary*

Recommendations

Amicus makes the following broad recommendations based on our interviews with girls, women, their families and professionals, an in-depth literature review, and conversations with various key stakeholders.

Recommendation - Apply what we know

Promote existing standards of gender responsive care and services, and provide training consistent with those standards. Professionals asked repeatedly for guidance on what to do and how to do it. Evidence-based standards exist and are included throughout this report. Such standards should be communicated to all policymakers and service providers. Assess, monitor and evaluate implemented standards at all levels.

Recommendation - Address racial, ethnic, and gender disparities

Ensure that programming for girls responds to their individual and cultural needs. Continue to examine and address disproportionate minority contact. Staff and curriculum should also reflect the diversity of the girls being served.

Recommendation - Focus on prevention and early intervention

Policy makers are encouraged to allocate more resources for prevention and early intervention strategies. Wise investment in prevention and early intervention will decrease the need for costly intervention as girls grow older.

"Sometimes they make it seem like we have no feelings, like what they say won't hurt us."

- Teen-aged girl in focus group discussing her treatment in the justice system



Recommendation - Integrate restorative justice values and practices

Programming should focus on helping girls repair their relationships within the community and building connections to support them in living a safe and healthy life. Formulate policies and allocate resources in such a way that communities and programs are able to engage in and focus on restoring girls to the community. Empower communities to partner with professionals in this process.

Recommendation - Keep track of the girls

In the process of trying to collect data on the numbers and demographic characteristics of girls in our justice system, Amicus found that data necessary to describe a continuum of services was not readily or consistently available through state and local agencies. Policy-makers must know who the girls are, how they move through the system and what works best with them if they are to allocate resources more efficiently and effectively. Collect and analyze data by gender, race, ethnicity, age, geography and offense.

Amicus (Latin for friend) is a Minnesota non-profit organization with 43 years of experience in building positive relationships between adult and juvenile offenders and their communities.

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