

## Breaking the Cycle: Challenges and Gaps in Gender-Responsive Care for Girls Facing Trauma

### Background

There is a dominant correlation between childhood trauma, school experiences, and subsequent involvement in both the child welfare and juvenile justice system, often referred to as Dual Status youth. While both boys and girls experience high levels of traumatic events, there is an even higher prevalence of certain types of traumas for girls. Girls face a disproportionate burden of adverse childhood experiences (ACE). This includes higher rates of sexual abuse, emotional abuse, and mental illness. Girls with high ACE scores are more likely to experience depression,

The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) recognizes adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) as "potentially traumatic events that occur in childhood, including experiencing violence, abuse, or neglect; witnessing violence in the home or community; having a family member attempt or die by suicide; and growing up in a household with substance use problems, mental health problems, and instability" (CDC, 2021). Research demonstrates youth exposure to ACEs is not only negatively related to involvement with the justice system but exposure to ACEs is higher among youths in the juvenile justice system compared to youths in other populations.

anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and substance abuse. Some adolescent girls struggle in school, have difficulty forming healthy relationships, and are at increased risk of involvement in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems. The disproportionately high ACE scores of girls, particularly those in child welfare, girls of color, and those involved in the juvenile justice system, paint a stark picture of their unique and extensive exposure to trauma.

This reality necessitates specialized interventions that go beyond mere service provision but cater to the specific needs and vulnerabilities of young girls. It is paramount all

girls, regardless of their background or experiences, have the support they need to flourish. Child advocates have rightly underscored the need for prevention—early intervention programs that consider the impact of childhood trauma—specifically the gendered aspect of certain trauma for at-risk girls and girls currently or at high risk of being involved with the juvenile justice system.

### What is gender responsiveness?

Across the spectrum of gender pedagogy, the terms "gender-sensitive," "gender-specific," and "gender-responsive" are often used interchangeably. However, the terms are not mutually exclusive. Gender-sensitive refers to awareness of and consideration for gender differences and their potential impact. It acknowledges that policies, programs, and initiatives can have different effects on boys, and girls due to their varying needs, experiences, and positions in society.

This awareness does not necessarily address inequalities or actively promote change. Whereas gender-specific practices focus on the unique needs, experiences, and challenges faced by specific gender groups. This can involve creating women-only support groups or offering boys-specific educational resources. While these efforts are crucial, they can sometimes reinforce existing gender norms without challenging their underlying inequalities. Gender-responsive approaches on the other hand build on both gender-sensitive and gender-specific frameworks to appropriately respond to the experiences of women and girls by adapting programs, content, materials, site

selection, and staff selection to develop environments that reflects an understanding of the lives of women and girls and responds to both their strengths and challenges (Covington & Bloom).

## One Size Doesn't Fit All: Why Systems Need a Gender-Specific Approach

Adolescent girls and boys differ biologically, developmentally, socially, and emotionally. Similarly, societal expectations of girls and boys also vary, and the combination of gender-based external and internal factors results in different circumstances causing their entry into the child welfare system, different experiences of the system while in it, and different pathways when they leave the system. This trauma often manifests in ways that are misunderstood and mislabeled as behavioral problems, leading to an increased risk of criminalization and harmful cycles of re-traumatization.

Research suggests that most child welfare systems lack a gender-specific approach, leading to suboptimal outcomes for both girls and boys (Worthington & Baynes-Dunning, 2013). With few exceptions, most child welfare systems do not approach their service delivery with the acknowledgment that boys and girls have different child development needs. The majority of child welfare systems offer generic services that fail to address the unique needs of both genders—hindering their well-being and development. This "one-size-fits-all" approach ignores the reality that girls grapple with issues like early motherhood (three times more likely than boys) and the lasting effects of sexual violence, priming detrimental consequences for children in the system.



With system-wide advancements in juvenile justice, away from default detention practices and towards trauma-informed approaches with community-based services, community psychologists and other behavioral health professionals have aided in centering the needs and experiences of youth. While this shift represents progress, some scholars criticize that few reform efforts have consistently focused on the gender-specific differences between young boys and girls (Anderson, Javandi, & Singh, 2023).

While both girls and boys share similar risk factors: such as family conflict, poverty and exposure to violence, their exposure rates and sensitivities differ significantly. Youth in the juvenile justice system have higher levels of mental health needs than their peers. However, studies have found girls have greater behavioral health needs than adolescent boys. For instance, girls are disproportionately affected by sexual assault, a recognized risk factor for both boys and girls. Particularly, findings show that girls in the juvenile justice system are more likely to experience major depression, anxiety, posttraumatic stress disorder, and emotion dysregulation.

### The Opportunity

Girls and women have been largely invisible among the justice-involved populations, and their interventions have been designed with boys and men in mind, with little attention paid to responsiveness to girls and women until recently.

Connecticut has historically been a leader in demonstrating how criminal legal systems should operate in a manner that is gender-responsive. Years ago, a significant amount of work was done to create a system for evaluating whether a program was gender responsive and implementing corrective actions to increase gender responsiveness.

By acknowledging the unique needs and experiences of girls, we can create more effective and just intervention and prevention programs. It is critical intervention as well prevention approaches are not only gender-responsive but also trauma-informed. Supportive trauma-informed care requires an understanding of the types, causes, and responses to trauma—an essential precursor to working with girls.

For these reasons, the Juvenile Justice Policy and Oversight Committee created a Gender Responsiveness Workgroup to expand the knowledge of the continuum of care that include trauma informed and culturally informed approaches, services, treatment, and permanency models for girls and include:

- Continuity of clinical support across a continuum of placement/treatment settings.
- Specialized treatment foster care for girls who have experienced sexual abuse and/or domestic minor sex trafficking, including children with intellectual and other developmental disabilities.
- Programs and practices that are developed with the input of sexual abuse and trafficking survivors.
- Service and treatment setting options that specifically address the needs of children with intellectual and other developmental disabilities.
- Examination of successful treatment/support models from other jurisdictions to inform service enhancement in CT.
- Supports for youth who identify as trans or gender non-conforming
- Diversion options through JORB or other diversion models
- Quality assurance framework/monitoring framework

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The Tow Youth Justice Institute is a university, state and private partnership established to lead the way in juvenile justice reform through collaborative planning, training, research and advocacy.

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