



A research, training, and policy initiative of the Center for Community Alternatives
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**Testimony before a Joint Hearing of the Committee on Women's Issues,
Committee on Youth Services and Subcommittee on Criminal Justice on
Adolescent Girls in the Juvenile Justice System
New York City Council
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Good afternoon. My name is Marsha Weissman. I am the Executive Director of the Center for Community Alternatives, also known as CCA. CCA is a private, not-for-profit agency that works in the fields of criminal and juvenile justice. CCA operates several alternative to detention and incarceration programs, including the Youth Advocacy Program that provides community supervision and support to juvenile offenders and juvenile delinquents, Crossroads, a substance abuse treatment program for women and Client Specific Planning, a sentencing advocacy program. Besides these programs, through our CHOICES programs, CCA also provides services to HIV and AIDS infected persons in the criminal justice system.

I would like to start by thanking the Chairs and all committee members that are sponsoring this hearing for the opportunity to address you on this important issue. CCA greatly appreciates the tremendous interest and support from the Council around alternative to incarceration programs.

CCA's perspective on the needs of girls in the juvenile justice system comes from our own program experience. We know about the needs of girls from our current work with them

through our juvenile justice program, Youth Advocacy. We see the increase in number of girls in the system from 1989 when we first started our program to today. We have some first hand insight about the kinds of issues that girls present, and what seems to work and what doesn't.

However, it is our work with adult women in Crossroads that provides the most haunting picture of girls in the juvenile justice system.

Most women in the criminal justice system first appeared as girls in the juvenile justice system. Even a cursory look at the lives of the women in Crossroads informs us about the needs of girls in the juvenile justice system and the costs and consequences of not addressing these needs at an earlier point in time. On average, the adult women in our ATI program first experienced physical and sexual abuse at age ten; by age 15 they were using drugs regularly. Almost none completed high school and were typically arrested two times as juveniles. The average age of first pregnancy is 19 years. By the time they enter our treatment program, they have been arrested and convicted multiple times, have been incarcerated, and have long drug histories. Many have already lost custody of their children, traded sex for drugs, and many are now HIV infected.

This picture can be refocused to some extent by program such as Crossroads and other ATIs. But I can tell you that the path to recovery - not only from drugs, but from a total lifestyle that comes to support a drug habit - is much tougher when someone is 30 rather than 13, 14 or 15. At age 30, however successful, one can never regain all opportunities that are available in childhood. Our adult clients are turning around their lives, yet they can never fully reclaim what is for the more fortunate among us, a time of incredible self discovery - adolescence and young adulthood.

This is why services to girls in the juvenile justice system are so important. Yet we see the same barriers and obstacles that confronted many of us when we first began to pay attention to the needs of women in the criminal justice system. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency data shows that between 1981 and 1997, arrest rates for girls increased more than for boys in every crime category. The number of delinquency cases of girls rose 76 percent compared to a 42 percent increase in the rate for boys. By 1996, girls made up almost one-quarter of all the delinquency cases in the country. Despite this tremendous growth in the number of girls in the juvenile justice system, they remain but a small percentage of the overall system and so their special needs tend to be neglected. And like their older sisters or mothers in the criminal justice system, emotional, physical and sexual abuse, are the most significant of the risk factors contributing to girls' delinquent and criminal behavior. Other issues unique to female juveniles include teen pregnancy that contributes to school drop out rates, undiagnosed learning disabilities, mental health problems and high rates of parental incarceration (both mothers and fathers). Girls in the juvenile justice system are also affected by the regular processes of development that are distorted by negative messages young women receive from society about their bodies, their minds and their worth. The physical passage to womanhood and the importance of relationships in the lives of girls requires special gender-specific services that are not generally available in the juvenile justice system.

The national increase in the number of girls in the juvenile justice system is mirrored, if not led by, the situation in New York City. Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ) data for fiscal year 1999 indicates that 1,163 girls were held in secure and non secure detention, making up 17 percent of the total population and reflective of a 13 percent increase in two years. Data from

the Office of Family and Children's Services (OFCS) showed that there were 278 girls under custody in 1997, comprising 12 percent of the total OFCS population, most of whom come from New York City.

CCA has experienced an increase in the number of girls released to our Youth Advocacy Program. The number of girls in our juvenile justice programs has more than doubled over the past several years - from 10 percent to almost 25 percent of participants this year. Since July 1999, the current contract year, we have had 32 girls released to the program from family courts or the J.O. youth parts. We have observed that it is more difficult to engage young women; their problems appear more complex, and even more connected to family and peer relationships. Young women tend to fall out of the program at twice the rate than the young men. CCA's experience is similar to other community corrections programs and is reflected by the large numbers of girls held in detention for probation violations - about 25 percent compared to 12 percent for boys.

CCA has been struggling to address the different needs of girls in our program for several years. Yet like other programs, we too have faced resource constraints that challenge our ability to serve this population. Girls remain a minority population in our program as well and we have difficulty developing gender-specific services, without sacrificing the basic services that we provide to all youth.

This year, we have eked out specialized group services for the young women in the program. The girls-only group meets once a week and focuses on different projects that specifically relate to the issues in their lives. The groups are successful in that they allow the young women to speak freely about issues that they are reluctant to discuss in front of boys. It is

also an environment that reduces the diversions that take place when any group of adolescent boys and girls get together. The young women's group has gone on field trips to plays and cultural events that portray pathways to women's success. They have also incorporated peer leadership activities including research and presentations on alternatives to incarceration. One of the more heartwarming experiences involved the girls in the Youth Advocacy Programs making a presentation to the women in the Crossroads program. An example of such a presentation is included with copies of my remarks.

The group is presently reading the book "*Ophelia Speaks*." The girls' reading of each chapter is followed by discussion of how the topics covered relate to their own their own lives. Even this modest effort at gender-specific services has improved our outcomes with girls. The number of girls who have left the program unsuccessfully has dropped from 25 percent to 15 percent.

We actually have a "wish list" for improving our services for girls that we believe would increase even more our ability to effectively serve this population. Ideally, we would like to have specialized assessment services that could better identify the pathways that tend to contribute to delinquency of girls - incest, victimization, their experiences as witnesses to violence. The specialized assessment would extend to understanding the larger family situation as well. Specialized clinical services to identify and treat the symptoms of girls' life histories - suicidal ideation or attempts, depression, sexual acting out, eating disorders. Therapy would also be done in the home to involve family members. A number of specialized groups would be offered including gender-specific life skills groups, survivors' groups for girls who have been victimized or affected by incest, physical abuse, neglect and domestic violence, group services to

reduce risk of pregnancy, HIV and STDs and peers leadership training. Frequent special events and field trips would be organized to introduce girls to educational, cultural, and recreational activities to challenge girls to develop healthy self images and challenging career aspirations. We would recruit mentors who would provide girls with role models and examples of the potential of womanhood.

The cost of such services to serve forty to fifty girls in the juvenile justice system would be about \$150,000 covering clinical and case management services. At a cost of about \$3,500 per girl, this pales in comparison to the estimated \$88,000 per year per youth in detention or \$70,000 to \$86,000 in an OFCS facility.

Equally if not more important, although less tangible, are the benefits to young women and their communities that would accrue from an investment in the development of their human potential. Early and intensive intervention that fully addresses the needs of girls in our juvenile justice system will help divert them from a statistically likely future in the adult criminal justice system. Instead of women entering a Crossroads or a Rakers or a Bedford Hills, leaving behind yet children and families at risk, we may instead see strong, healthy young women functioning as productive citizens and mothers to a new promising generation.

The Council's actions over the past two years, including the various reports on the importance of ATIs and drug treatment and your concrete support for programs and research reflects a sound approach to public policy. We hope that this commitment will continue and even be expanded to include resources to address the special needs of young women in the juvenile justice system. Thank you again for this hearing and the opportunity to speak to you on this important issue.

The Center for Community Alternatives (CCA) is a leader in the field of community-based alternatives to incarceration. Through pioneering services as well as the innovative research, policy analysis and training of its Justice Strategies division, CCA fosters individual transformation, reduces reliance on incarceration and advocates for more responsive juvenile and criminal justice policies.

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