

FOCUS GROUP WITH FEMALES IN JUVENILE DETENTION

Reducing Disproportionate Minority Contact in the Juvenile Justice System, Guilford County Demonstration Project



“We don’t have that loud a voice, so, you know, it’s very rare that we find those that want to help us, you know what I’m saying?”

METHODS

In the Spring of 2005, a focus group session was conducted with 1 White female and 5 African American females whose average age was 14 1/2 years old and who were enrolled in Guilford County’s Juvenile Structured Day Program. They were convened to discuss their personal experience and provide their insights into ways the juvenile justice system could address the issues around DMC in Guilford County and it was conducted as a part of the Disproportionate Minority Contact in North Carolina’s Juvenile Justice System Project, funded by a grant from the NC Governor’s Crime Commission. The session was audio-recorded and transcribed. Findings and interpretations represent major themes and perspectives of the sessions as summarized by multiple observers and readers.

MAJOR THEMES

- > Multiple factors contribute to entry into the juvenile justice system.
- > There are several possible prevention influences.
- > Family situations are volatile and non-supportive.
- > Some community programs are more effective than others in addressing the needs of these females.
- > Experiences with court system have been largely negative.
- > These young women question their future.
- > The impacts of race pervade their lives.

MULTIPLE FACTORS CONTRIBUTE TO ENTRY INTO THE JUVENILE JUSTICE SYSTEM

These girls reported that their initial involvement in the juvenile justice system ranged from between ages 10 to 15 years old. The average length of involvement was 2 years. Several reported having been abused or neglected by their parents or caregivers.

Some said that they began misbehaving early because they received little or no consequences for their behavior. One youth suggested she may not be facing her current troubles if she would have been punished at home for more minor offenses, like stealing from classmates, when she was younger.

Likewise, several girls reported skipping school because they were not made to go by their caregivers. As one young woman said, “There were a bunch of days when I wasn’t told to

go to school...if someone had pushed me to get up and go....”

Other girls suggested that blocked access to extracurricular activities may have contributed to their criminal involvement. Though most want to participate, often they are ineligible for various reasons: sixth graders are not allowed to play junior varsity sports, participation in other activities are contingent upon earning A’s or B’s in classes, and breaking certain school rules makes students ineligible for participation in after-school activities. One youth commented, “They take so many things away from us and so we’re like, really, what do we have to go to school for?”

Even when girls are eligible to participate, they often feel like activities are designed to meet the cultural interests of white youth; and activities that may

be more culturally interesting to African American youth like step or rap are rarely offered.

Other girls talked about sitting in classrooms when they felt like teachers were disinterested in what they were learning and were more likely to give students failing grades for poor performance than to ask about the problems they were having.

Outside of school, several girls said that in their neighborhoods, they felt compelled to fight often. One young lady described where she lived as “not such a good place.”

In addition to challenges confronted at home and in the community, some young women’s lives were further complicated by their becoming mothers while still in high school.

POTENTIAL PREVENTION OPPORTUNITIES

“I think if someone had actually sat me down and talked to me about womanhood and about the stages of growing up about life in general, and really showed me that attention and showed me that love that I needed, I wouldn’t be in here.”

The young ladies mentioned changed family situations, a different community environment, and more expectations in school as possible influences that could have prevented their participation in behavior that led them into the juvenile justice system. Many felt no one truly cared about them or talked with them about appropriate behavior for girls. They wished that prevention had started earlier, when they were much younger. The depth of their insights (seemingly beyond their years) about the possible causes of their entry into the juvenile justice system did not appear to translate into behavior changes that may have prevented their criminal involvement. Though adults in their lives have been largely unreliable, the girls were not ready to give up on them altogether. They still see that they need positive adult influences. In the words of one young lady, “I feel that we also need some guidance in our life.”

These girls wished they had adults in their lives who would speak openly with them about the immediate and future consequences of maladaptive behavior. Some thought they may have avoided their present trouble if caregivers had taken a more proactive role in their lives, by teaching them how to behave in socially accept-

able ways and by disciplining them when they did not meet those expectations. As one young lady said, “They can start being more direct with us. Tell me what’s going to happen when I get older if I go in a store and steal. What’s going to happen to me.... what’s the real life?”

Others suggested they may have been deterred if they had visited the juvenile detention center when they were younger to see what their lives could be like if they acted out. In the words of one youth, “I think if I had actually experienced detention before getting in trouble I think I would’ve been warned.”

Others mentioned involvement in extracurricular activities as likely deterrents from delinquent behavior. Girls believed that some students only attend school in order to participate in assemblies, attend ball games, or other “fun” school activities; and allowing all interested youth to participate encourages attendance and success in school. One female asserted, “If there were more afternoon school events, then more kids would participate during school and do what they have to do so that they can get that other reward, you know, after school is over.”

CHALLENGING FAMILY SITUATIONS

“My father, he does drugs ... and it’s just, it’s stressing me out trying to help him with his problems, and then I got problems myself.”

The young ladies described their family situations as fraught with abuse, parents using drugs, low parental expectations concerning going to school or their behavior. These situations made them angry and they acted this out inappropriately.

In many cases, parents were simply unable to provide a stable support system for them because of their own problems with the legal system or with drug addiction. Girls described highly volatile and unstable home lives, where physical abuse, substance abuse, and sexual assault were common. Abusers were described as parents, grandparents, uncles, and foster parents. Victims most often included the girls themselves, their mothers, and their siblings.

Several girls also discussed instability in their residence and described frequent moves between parents’ homes, between those of other relatives, or between various foster and group homes. Many girls reported that their new living arrangements were little improved over their original ones, with neglect and abuse common. One young lady described her experience this way, “I been living with all my family members and all them said I was bad; I wasn’t going to get nothing in life.”

In discussing how the instability and volatility in their private home lives influences their behavior in the community, girls suggested that inadequate parental discipline and supervision sets them up for failure and/or serious problems in the future. As an example, a young lady mentioned



“Really, I didn’t have nobody to care for me.”

that when she was 13, her curfew was 10pm, too late, in her opinion, for someone so young. Another said that although her mother had dismissed her shoplifting as unintentional, she believed that unpunished petty offenses may escalate into real trouble for youth when they get older.

COMMUNITY PROGRAMS: ARE WE MEETING THE NEEDS OF THESE GIRLS?



Several programs were described and in most cases, girls reported they had not been helpful to them. Many well-known public and non-profit services in Guilford

County were mentioned. In discussing why certain programs were not helpful, youth used the example of anger management class. They said this program was ineffective because it ignored the realities of their lives. It taught them to handle conflict in ways that were maladaptive in their neighborhoods and

schools, and caused them to be ridiculed or attacked while they attempted to count to ten, as instructed, to prevent a fight.

Other programs, especially mental health counseling and some medications were described as helpful; however, several young women found it difficult to get to these services as often as required.

One young lady described her court-mandated participation in community service in a Hospice program as effective. Although it was very difficult and sad for her, she felt that she made a difference for the children she interacted with there.

When asked why they did not take advantage of other community re-

“When I was doing my community service, I got to see how lucky I was.”

sources, such as those offered by recreation centers and the YMCA/YWCA, they said they were either not aware of them or could not pay for them. And when girls cannot afford to participate in certain activities, they feel left out and believe those places are really not there for them. Most were surprised to learn that many community programs like these offered scholarships they could complete themselves without necessarily involving their parents.

“They judge you for things you have done without even knowing you.”

EXPERIENCES IN THE COURT SYSTEM

The young ladies reported that they had been in court several times. Several reported going to court for probation violations and others were in detention awaiting an out-of-home placement. These young women had never met their assigned public defender before their court appearance. They reported great distrust of the attorneys who advise them to plead guilty and of the juvenile court counselors whom they perceive as the ones who recommend detention as the consequence for their charge. The girls were generally not hopeful that their lives would change for the better once they exit the court system since they expect to return to the same life situations that brought them to court in the first place.

These girls felt that they had no voice in the court. They expected their court counsel-

ors and public defenders to relay their personal situations to the judge, but were often let down by them. They believed attorneys and court counselors did not generally listen to them, but gave priority to their parents. However, some girls felt that their parents just wanted them out of the home and will say anything to achieve that end. The girls perceived judges as always sending them to detention, often for minor offenses. As has been mentioned before, it was very important to these girls that the adults making decisions about them get to know them and they are disappointed when this does not happen.

Most girls felt they were poorly informed about the court system. For instance, one female was not aware that anything she said under oath could be held against her. Another did not under-

stand why her attorney advised pleading self-defense to a charge she did not think was fair and she had no time to ask questions before her case was heard.

These young women were also intimidated by the court process, and were afraid to speak up in their own defense for fear of worsening their situation. One girl described hearing laughter in the courtroom when she addressed the judge directly to voice objection to what was being said about her.

Girls felt under-informed about their cases as they awaited their hearings in the detention center. They believed court counselors should visit more often and maintain regular communication until their cases were heard. They felt that they often had to initiate contact with their court counselors.

RACE PERVADES DAILY LIFE



“They are more sympathetic to other races than to us.”

All of the young ladies believed that African American youth are treated differently than White youth. For instance, they felt that African Americans are more quickly stereotyped in school as troublemakers or labeled as learning or behaviorally-disordered. In the words of one youth, “Everybody looks at us and thinks ‘bad juveniles’ but you know, we really ain’t.”

The young women generally believed African American youth are over-diagnosed and medicated because adults would rather not address other circumstances that may underlie their behavioral problems. They also did not believe being labeled in such a way

leads to appropriate interventions for their learning or behavior problems. Instead, they felt like it increases their ostracism, especially from white people who respond to them as diagnoses rather than individuals with complicated lives.

In schools, African American females felt like they are more often punished even when they are provoked by white students. Whites are often ignored while African Americans are suspended for involvement in the same incident. Moreover, they felt like white teachers, in particular, are most interested in the personal and educational goals of white students and generally ignore those of black youth.

In discussing their impressions of the impact of race in the court, they believed that most people with power to make decisions about them in court are white and have little understanding or empathy for them and their life challenges. They offered several examples of witnessing white youth being asked to explain what personal or family circumstances may underlie

their behaviors, but they could remember no similar questioning of African American youth, whom they believe are judged more by their “nature” than their circumstances. When African American females hear white females being labeled like they are in court, they can empathize with the unfairness of such labeling, but when whites receive different consequences for the same behavior, it does not make sense to them. As one youth said, “So, basically, they giving me, they giving me a white person’s label, but they’re not treating me like a white person, you know what I’m saying?”

Though girls did not dismiss the impact of race on their lives, they clearly articulated that an even bigger issue for them was their impression that few adults, white or black, genuinely care about them.

“It’s not really racial. It’s just that you have people that care about you and people that don’t care and people that want to see you fail and people that want to see you succeed.”

WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD?

The young ladies reflected a hopelessness concerning their return home to the same community. Some girls believed their life chances would improve if they could find a way out of poverty. Others would like to receive counseling and want their entire family included in the counseling conversation. They would like for their parents to set limits that are realistic, not locking them in their houses or allowing them to stay out too late.

They also fear having to overcome the stigma of having been in the juvenile court system, which they believed may undermine their success in school or in securing a job. As one young woman expressed,

“It’s so easy just to get into the system, but it’s so hard to get out.”

The girls can imagine themselves succeeding in their lives eventually, but are disheartened at the obstacles in their way. In their view, for things to really change for the good for them, the community must take an active role and genuine interest in their lives and offer them more support as they confront particularly difficult challenges everyday.

Solutions to the multitude of problems encountered by these young women must recognize and accept the reality of their life circumstances. Solutions cannot assume parents will or

should take primary roles in the supervision, guidance, and discipline of their children, because, as these young women have described, many parents are unable to do so because of their own problems – youth, drug problems, financial issues, and domestic violence. As these girls have reminded us, improving their lives is a community responsibility.



“The community needs to start coming together with us, for real.”

“I feel that when we get out of here, what’re we gonna do besides go back to the same old stuff we used to do?”