

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/gender-and-justice-in-america/juvenile-justice-reform-is-not-about-boys-vs-girls>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

When faced with the reality of the justice systems impact on girls and the lack of reform efforts directed at girls unique pathways into the juvenile justice system, Russell Simmons a longtime advocate for justice reform acknowledged that he had not been paying close enough attention.

It is time to talk about our girls and criminal justice reform, Simmons said in a recent [Huffington Post blog post](#). I have called for an end to mass incarceration because of its devastating impact on men and boys of color. But, like so many others, I did not focus on girls enough. I believed that our girls were, comparatively, less harmed by the failures of our criminal justice system.

Mr. Simmons should be commended for acknowledging the lack of focus on justice-involved girls in a reform context that more typically pits boys and girls against each other in advocacy efforts to secure policy change and resources a battle that girls typically lose because they make up just 25 percent of justice-involved youth. Reducing girls incarceration demands a targeted effort. And throughout the history of reform efforts, girls have been systematically excluded from juvenile justice policy analysis, programmatic investments, and research, which is typically conducted with all-male samples.

As systems consider how best to respond to girls incarceration, it is important that they recognize that girls delinquency is not simply the [smaller, pinker version](#) of boys delinquency. It is true that some challenges facing youth in the justice system living in high poverty neighborhoods, facing high rates of criminalization in schools apply regardless of gender. But girls paths to delinquency also emerge within a social context characterized, among other factors, by high rates of exposure to [sexual and gender-based violence](#), greater caregiving responsibilities for their own children and for family members, and [racialized gender discrimination](#) in educational and employment opportunities. Too often, what passes as gender-responsive girls programs in facilities are programs rooted in gender stereotypes, not programs that attend to the gendered context of girls lives.

But juvenile justice reform is not a battle of the sexes. It is time to think bigger than girls vs. boys in our calls for gender-responsive reform. Gender is deeply linked to justice involvement for ALL youth. For instance, the massive scale of the incarceration of men and boys of color has a lot to do with [racialized stereotypes of masculinity](#) that construct young men of color as dangerous criminals. Sexism and gender stereotypes that carve out rigid notions of masculinity and femininity are rampant in law enforcement practices that drive youth into the system and in juvenile justice programs that respond to youth once they are inside. These stereotypes are harmful to boys, to girls, and to LGBT and gender non-conforming youth who are [overrepresented](#) in the justice system.

It is incumbent on us as a just society to ensure that every child involved with the juvenile justice system is treated with dignity and afforded the opportunities they need to move forward into successful futures. All children deserve to be free from gender discrimination and affirmed in developing their gender identity. It is long past time to invest in meaningful, gender-responsive justice reform that attends to the gendered social factors that shape the lives of youth of color, drive them into the justice system, and define their experience once they are inside.

Through the [Gender & Justice in America](#) blog series, Vera will explore issues facing justice-involved women and girls in the fields of adult corrections, youth justice, immigration, victimization, substance use, and mental health.

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