

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/this-womens-history-month-lets-leave-girls-incarceration-in-the-past>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Womens History Month is a time to celebrate the social, cultural, economic and political achievements of women and girls across the globe, while at the same time calling for renewed commitment to gender equality. This Womens History Month, Vera is inviting the country to join us in taking a historic step for girls by leaving girls incarceration in the past for good. Over the past decade, reform efforts to divert young people charged with low-level offenses have dramatically driven down the countrys juvenile justice population. But, girls have been overlooked in these efforts. The number of girls who are incarcerated has decreased more slowly than the number of boys, and girls now [comprise more of the juvenile justice population](#) than ever before. The majority of girls continue to be detained for the same low level offenses that have been the focus of reform namely status offenses, technical violations, simple assault, and public order offenses excluding weapons.

The practice of continuing to detain and place girls who commit minor offenses not only goes against research on effective juvenile justice practice and adolescent development, but also raises significant equity concerns, as girls are more likely to be held in custody and often spend more time in custody than boys for the same or similar low level offenses.¹ Further, persistent [racial disparities](#) among girls and the stark [overrepresentation of people who are LGB/TGNC in girls juvenile facilities](#) show that not all girls are treated equally.

Last year, Vera took an important step towards addressing these inequities by launching the [New York City Task Force on Ending Girls Incarceration](#) with a collaborative of the citys key juvenile justice and youth-serving agencies that aims to develop a comprehensive plan to end girls incarceration in the five boroughs. Now, were committed to doing the same on a national scale. This is an ambitious but achievable goal: Despite girls increasing proportional representation among youth in the justice system, the absolute number of girls detentions nationally is relatively small, just 45,847.² In fact, most states had fewer than 150 girls in placement on the day of the last census in 2015 and many had fewer than 50 girls in placement.³

Closing the chapter on girls incarceration requires that, for the first time, the justice reform field focus on systems change for girls. Today, we are proud to announce that we are expanding our Initiative to End Girls Incarceration to new jurisdictions that are prepared to champion the issue and pave the way for the rest of the country. We are [requesting letters of interest](#) from juvenile justice agencies seeking to participate in a jurisdiction-wide initiative to eliminate the confinement of girls and LGB/TGNC youth in female units of their juvenile justice system.

As we announce this initiative, were cognizant that this years Womens History Month also happens to be in the midst of an extraordinary moment in the global movement for womens rights, equality and justice. Sexual harassment, violence, and discrimination against women have catapulted our nation into a renewed national discussion about gender equality, and people around the world are mobilizing in the form of global marches and campaigns including #MeToo and #TimesUp to create a future that is more equal and just for women and girls. Against this backdrop, it should be noted that incarcerated girls (over 80 percent of whom are survivors of sexual violence and are often arrested for circumstances directly related to their abuse through the [sexual abuse to prison pipeline](#)) have been largely left out of the conversation.

Vera is committed to working for a society that respects the dignity of every person and safeguards justice for everyone. It has never been clearer that these efforts must include girls and gender non-conforming youth. [Learn more](#) about our work to end girls incarceration.

1. Erin M. Espinosa and Jon R. Sorensen, The Influence of Gender and Traumatic Experiences on Length of Time Served in Juvenile Justice Settings, *Criminal Justice and Behavior* 43, no. 2 (2016), 187-203; Meda Chesney-Lind, Judicial Enforcement of the Female Sex Role: The Family Court and the Female Delinquent, *Issues in Criminology* 8, no. 2 (1973), 51-69

2. Based on Veras analysis of OJJDP data at Melissa Sickmund, Anthony Sladky, and Wei Kang, et al., Easy Access to Juvenile Court Statistics: 1985-2014 (2017) (database), retrieved from <http://www.ojjdp.gov/ojstatbb/ezajcs/>.

3. Based on Veras analysis of OJJDP data at Melissa Sickmund, Anthony Sladky, and Wei Kang, et al., Easy Access to the Census of Juveniles in Residential Placement: 1997-2015 (2017) (database), retrieved from <http://www.ojjdp.gov/ojstatbb/ezajcs/>.

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