

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/gender-and-justice-in-america/end-the-use-of-status-offenses-and-close-the-front-door-on-girls-incarceration>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

When I was 13 years old, skipping school and breaking curfew were two behaviors that I engaged in often.

If anyone would have asked me why I was skipping school and staying out late, I would have told them that I'd been running away from home after arguments with my parents, and that finding a place to sleep at night was more important to me than going to school.

Yet no one ever asked why my attendance fell off. Instead, I found myself in handcuffs and sent to court. This process was seamless because my school had a probation officer conveniently stationed inside of it. When I missed a certain number of school days, I received a referral to the probation officer, instead of a school counselor.

Status offense behaviors that are not crimes but are only against the law because of a person's age were my entry point into the juvenile justice system. Going to court was confusing and failed to address the underlying challenges I was facing as a girl having problems at home. For the rest of my teen years, I continued to struggle and eventually landed in the adult court system. Not offering support to me at that time was a missed opportunity that could have helped me to avoid this future justice system involvement.

We need a different system response.

Less punitive responses such as a referral to a school social worker, or connection to a girls support group could have helped me develop the tools I needed to navigate problems at home and disrupt my trajectory through the system. Although well-intentioned, the schools' reliance on the justice system as a response to my absenteeism failed to address the underlying issues and traumas that were the root cause of my problems.

This is still happening to girls today. Although girls are only 25 percent of the overall juvenile justice system, 40 percent of children who are taken to court for status offenses and 55 percent of children who are taken to court specifically for running away are girls. In fact, status offenses and technical violations of probation account for 37 percent of girls' detention admissions. It is important to note that girls' incarceration is an issue that disproportionately affects girls of color. Today, Black girls, Native American girls, and Latina girls are overrepresented in the justice system compared to their white peers, due to gender stereotypes that are further compounded by race and class.

At Vera, we are working to end girls' incarceration. In order to achieve this goal, we need to end the use of status offenses entirely. Our recent report, [Girls Matter](#), aims to help systems do just that. Building upon Vera's [Toolkit for Status Offense System Reform](#), [Girls Matter](#) empowers stakeholders to analyze how policies and practices may be negatively or differently impacting girls and to address disparities that are missed when systems assessment and reform do not include a targeted gender lens.

What I needed was support, not punishment. My story is only one example of a missed opportunity to stop entry into the justice system altogether and by ending the use of status offenses, we can close the front door on girls' incarceration. Vera's initiative to end girls' incarceration envisions a society where girls' strength and resistance is celebrated and not criminalized, and where they receive support rather than punishment for behavioral responses to trauma in their lives. With the resources we provide in [Girls Matter](#), systems can learn how to change the way they respond to girls' behaviors and begin to put an end to girls' incarceration.

NEWS

SPECIAL REPORT (CHAPTERED)

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