

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/trafficked-and-exploited-girls-need-help-not-incarceration>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

A few years ago, I met a young girl, Denise, who told me that her uncle had repeatedly raped her since she was eight. To stop the endless abuse, Denise said, she deliberately got pregnant by another man. Her plan worked. The uncle did stop raping her, but by that time, she was a mother at 15. Sadly, I did not meet Denise at a support group for incest survivors or a special high school program for teen mothers. I met Denise in a Delaware detention center for girls. She was behind bars for a probation violation, a charge that originated from her arrest for truancy. Mind you, Denise missed school because she had to take care of her baby.

Denise's story is representative of [why so many of our girls are behind bars](#). According to research produced by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention's [Girls Study Group](#), girls who are sexually abused are much more likely to get caught up in the juvenile justice system. Currently, there are more than 14,000 girls under age 18 incarcerated in the United States and these girls are disproportionately black. Girls, who tend to be arrested at younger ages than boys and usually enter the system at 13 or 14, are mostly apprehended for minor, nonviolent offenses such as truancy, running away, loitering, alcohol and substance use coping behaviors that overwhelmingly result from being sexually abused.

To escape the abuse, many girls run away from homes or foster care, only to be arrested for running away or enticed/coerced by pimps or traffickers and subsequently sold for sex. According to the Department of Justice, there are currently an estimated 293,000 American children at risk of commercial sexual exploitation. The majority of them are girls between the ages of 12 and 14. Often, they are girls of color. These children are abducted by traffickers and then routinely raped, beaten, and sometimes even branded. These girls are in desperate need of help, yet they are too often detained for child prostitution or prostitution-related charges.

Over the last couple of years, there has been considerable attention given to the school to prison pipeline. But, in so many ways, that is our boys' story. Our girls have a different story, one of being entangled in a complex mix of sexual victimization and trauma.

It is time to shine some light their way. At a policy level, that means ending the detainment of girls for status offenses and ceasing to arrest and detain trafficked and exploited girls. Furthermore, discourse and research must be cognizant of the intersections of race and gender so that the experiences of girls in the status offense system are no longer marginalized or obfuscated. Finally, policy and funding for trauma-informed, gender-specific and community-based diversion programs such as PACE in Florida or the Center for Young Women's Development in San Francisco must be scaled up.

Our girls don't deserve to be criminalized for enduring abuse and trauma. They deserve the chance to be seen and treated as the victims and survivors that they are. It is time to give girls like Denise that chance so that they can heal.

This blog was first posted by the [Status Offense Reform Center](#). Malika Saada Saar is Special Counsel on Human Rights at The Raben Group. She also serves as Director of the Human Rights Project for Girls (Rights4Girls), a human rights organization focused on gender-based violence against young women and girls in the U.S.

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