National **Girls** Institute

OJJDP

NCCD | National Council on Crime & Delinquency

# Voices From the Field: NGI Listening Sessions Executive Summary

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# Acknowledgements

## About the National Girls Institute

The National Girls Institute (NGI) is a federally-funded partnership between the National Council on Crime and Delinquency (NCCD) and the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP). NGI is a research-based training and resource clearinghouse designed to advance understanding of girls' issues and improve program and system responses to girls in the juvenile justice system. For more information, visit www.nationalgirlsinstitute.org.

## About the National Council on Crime and Delinquency

NCCD promotes just and equitable social systems for individuals, families, and communities through research, public policy, and practice. For more information, visit www.nccdglobal.org.

## About the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention

OJJDP provides national leadership, coordination, and resources to prevent and respond to juvenile delinquency and victimization. OJJDP supports states and communities in their efforts to develop and implement effective and coordinated prevention and intervention programs and to improve the juvenile justice system so that it protects public safety, holds offenders accountable, and provides treatment and rehabilitative services tailored to the needs of juveniles and their families. For more information, visit www.ojjdp.gov.

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## National Girls Institute - Listening Sessions Summary

### Background

The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) has partnered with the National Council on Crime and Delinquency (NCCD) Center for Girls and Young Women to create the National Girls Institute (NGI). Listening sessions conducted with hundreds of stakeholders nationwide, representing diverse backgrounds and life experiences, provide critical information about the training, technical assistance, and resource needs of stakeholders.

### Methods

In 2011, 64 listening sessions and 16 small-group interviews were held across the United States. In all, 607 stakeholders (313 girls, 251 community stakeholders across the continuum of services, and 43 parents/caregivers) participated.

### Results

*Training and Technical Assistance*

Staff training topics identified by girls included listening/communication, valuing girls' perspectives, staff positive attitudes, respect, guidance, and training to better relate and understand girls' problems. Among key professional stakeholders, topics such as mental health and trauma, abuse and neglect, pregnancy and teen parenthood, communication and relationships, and race and culture emerged. Although the question posed was regarding training topics and areas, respondents also discussed the importance of the approach to training, which should be gender-responsive, culturally responsive, trauma-informed, strengths-based, simple and basic, and involve families.

Regarding technical assistance, staff identified the need for better skills to inform their responses to girls' "acting out" behaviors. Staff also wanted technical assistance in programming and curriculum development aimed at addressing girls' behaviors and guided by best practices. Other priority areas of technical assistance included data/research, program development and implementation, assessment, program evaluation, and funding. The responses from the topical sessions reiterated similar technical assistance needs such as resources, as well as training/best practices on prevalent issues including abuse and trauma, bullying, how to engage girls and families, and cultural competency.

Regarding who should receive the training, an important trend emerged. The most common response was school personnel, followed by law enforcement, judges and attorneys, juvenile justice and social service professionals, and finally parents/caregivers. Logistically, face-to-face and online training formats were identified as effective.

*Resource and Information Needs*

Girls want information on topics including communication, education, family help, drugs and alcohol, health, arts and expressing themselves, STDs, relationships, pregnancy, and safe dating. They want basic resources in the areas of jobs/employment, mentors, state resources, crisis, shelters, legal, sex, and medical.

For key stakeholders, common responses to resource and informational needs included data trends/research, funding, and best practices for working with girls. Stakeholders also expressed a need for information about girls' agencies, community guides, and tools such as girls' curricula and materials.

Parents/caregivers want advice, parent education, support, and information about community resources. They also expressed the desire to understand their daughters' experiences and to obtain more

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information about social media such as Facebook. In addition, parents/caregivers voiced a need for community resources, especially prevention and intervention programs, as well as help navigating the justice system and information about systems in general.

*What Works and Ineffective/Harmful Practices*

Girls noted several differences in how they were treated as compared to boys and discussed what they considered to be fair and unfair treatment in general and by decision makers in particular. Fair treatment was described as being treated with respect, care, and leniency. Conversely, girls named a myriad of ways in which they were treated unfairly, including examples of racial bias. Rules regarding safety and structure were considered positive. Rules that girls thought need to be changed included procedures for contact with family and non-family as well as communication in general. The consistent implementation of rules was also identified as an area for improvement.

Regarding positive practices, key stakeholders spoke to the need for girls-only space and for women to work with girls in certain capacities such as counseling. However, they also reinforced the importance of both genders working with youth. Stakeholders cited numerous harmful policies and practices that intersect with family, foster care, school, and justice systems. For example, policies related to domestic violence, running away from home, and school discipline practices were considered negative. Stakeholders also emphasized the lack of gender-responsive services and resources.

When asked about harmful policies or practices affecting girls, parents/caregivers identified system-level issues, such as lack of family involvement in the process and system processes being harmful to girls. Another theme was a lack of consistency between what different providers and professionals across the system said to girls and their families, as well as a lack of consistent care and follow-through. Of note, parents/caregivers had difficulty reporting policies

and practices that positively affect girls; however, many respondents identified particular individuals who were helpful (i.e., court staff, social workers, etc.).

*NGI's Critical Focus Areas*

Girls primarily identified family support, peers, therapy, and caring adults and supportive staff as critical focus areas. Girls also identified problems within the family; issues inside programs, such as staff and medical neglect; negative adult behavior and racism; and a lack of options and opportunities. Regarding how girls wanted staff to respond to them, girls identified three major themes: they wanted staff to understand their emotions and feelings, their families, and their future goals and plans. In terms of what helped girls, the theme of maternal relationships surfaced as both what girls need and what helped them.

Staff mentioned girls' issues (including family problems, abuse, sex education/pregnancy, and trauma), programming issues (including lack of transition, training, programming, and funding challenges), and system issues (differential treatment of girls and lack of family resources) as critical focus areas for the NGI.

Concerns voiced in the topical sessions reflected the themes present in the general listening sessions,

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including abuse, anger, and adolescent development. Interestingly, education stakeholders emphasized the need for judges, law enforcement, and other system representatives to receive training on girls' emotions and differential treatment. Additional salient themes included gender expectations, sexuality, and the influence of heteronormative expectations. The intersection of gender, race, culture, and sexuality was also important and supports the need to recognize within-group differences.

Parents/caregivers discussed issues in school and the need for school support, prevention and intervention programs, community involvement, and resources as key focus areas. Regarding recommendations to improve the system, parents/caregivers identified people or services that had a positive impact, including social services, counselors, and court staff, as well as family.

### Standards of Care

The overwhelming majority of stakeholders cited different programs and models that practitioners were using and/or thought were effective, specifically mentioning existing gender-responsive curricula and programming. Others mentioned general programming such as female mentors, wrap-around services, and therapeutic courts. Participants also named numerous resources that had a positive impact

on girls' lives, as well as free or low-cost creative best practices. Finally, an approach that involves families was identified as paramount.

### Findings and Recommendations

Several themes emerged from the listening sessions across the key stakeholder groups.

### Communication

Girls stated that they want to talk to their parents, and parents/caregivers (particularly mothers) want to be able to talk with their daughters. However, both groups felt challenges to effective communication related to generational differences in girls' language/ way of speaking and girls feeling misunderstood by parents. Girls also spoke about the importance of healthy communication with staff. Interestingly, staff also named communication as a main area for training. NGI recommends that communication skills be given priority and considered an essential element of gender responsiveness, including gender differences, in communication.

### Peer Learning

A main theme for girls was that they want to share advice and hear other girls' stories. Parents also want advice from other parents regarding how to help their daughters. Staff echoed this sentiment, reporting they want opportunities to learn from their peers. NGI recommends the development of websites and resources for peer sharing and collaboration with agencies that are already doing this effectively. Additionally, support for the field to create or disseminate information for girls, parents/caregivers, and staff is critical.

### Gender Responsiveness

Girls referenced how they are different from boys and spoke of their need to be understood, have their feelings validated, and be affirmed and loved. Similarly, the approach to working with girls in a gender-responsive manner was an issue raised by staff. NGI recommends that the work of NGI and its advisory board be informed by the voices of girls and parents/

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caregivers. Through NGI TTA, it is recommended that the lessons learned on girls/families from the OJJDP national conference—especially those practices that include cutting-edge research and the translation of research to best practice—be applied at the programming and system levels.

*Nonjudgmental Approach*

Judgment of parents/caregivers' and girls' life context was a strong theme and provides further empirical support to the gender-responsive literature. NGI recommends that information learned from girls and parents/caregivers about the importance of a nonjudgmental approach be integrated into the development of standards of care to guide programming during the roundtable meeting. Additional funding should be used for piloting family-focused interventions and research inquiry into effective strategies to engage parents/caregivers in the day-to-day treatment milieu.

*Multi-System Approach*

All groups acknowledged that individual-level solutions are grossly inadequate and must include schools, families, the justice system, and other systems if we are to truly help girls. NGI recommends that a roundtable of leaders/decision makers from various disciplines identify strategies for breaking down silos of child welfare, education, mental health,



public health, etc., and increasing communication and collaboration. Funding and support should be directed at the integration of services. Additionally, schools, law enforcement, and families should be included in awareness efforts and develop/provide specialized training for these groups.

*Individual and Universal Needs*

Girls' unique needs revolved around the specifics of being involved in the justice system, while the girls also named typical needs related to information about topics such as dating, education, and jobs. Parents stated they need information about how to navigate the justice system, but also want ideas for activities to do with their daughters. NGI recommends the development of a clearinghouse of information that is responsive to these individual and universal needs. Additional support should be directed at research that continues to track the profile of girls entering the juvenile justice system, and their families, to monitor changes over time.

*Technology and Social Networking*

Girls and parents identified Facebook and social networking technology as an area of interest both from a relationship level and bullying perspective. An exploration of the impact that social networking technology has on at-risk girls can provide valuable insight into girls' experiences in the juvenile justice system. NGI recommends supporting research that explores the intersection of the impact of social media and girls' involvement in the juvenile justice system.

*Within-Girl Differences*

The theme that important differences exist among girls surfaced most strongly in the topical sessions, particularly regarding issues of gender expectations, sexuality, and race and culture. NGI recommends all NGI TTA acknowledge differences among girls and provide training that does not reinforce gender stereotypes. Additionally, information and resources should address differences within gender, girls in gangs, LGBT girls, and girls in tribal communities.

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## Balance Recognition of Past with Future Orientation

An interesting finding is that while girls felt the need to be understood and for their backgrounds and circumstances to be considered, they also maintained a focus on their futures. This is especially salient as future orientation is an important factor related to positive outcomes. NGI recommends resources for girls, parents/caregivers, and stakeholders that acknowledge girls' future goals and reinforce positive future orientation. Additionally, collaboration with community organizations is recommended to provide resources at the state and local levels.

## Examination of Policies and Practices Impacting Girls

Although standards have not been formally developed and disseminated, practitioners are in the position to share what they have learned from experience regarding best practices. At this stage, the field would benefit from standards of care in working with girls. NGI recommends the use of information learned as a guide for the advisory board to discuss policy development and resource sharing, provide a platform for next steps, and help develop NGI resources for websites.

## Future Work

Given the qualitative approach employed in the listening sessions, we have a wealth of information that contextualizes and complements existing research. These results and findings lay the foundation for NGI's future work. For example, we learned that training protocols must include communication skills training, provide forums for peer sharing opportunities, and incorporate staff views of families. We also learned that information sharing is critical, as is including the voices of girls and their parents/caregivers to inform the work. Information from the topical sessions will assist in how we can better respond to girls in gangs, and girls who identify as lesbian, transgendered, or bisexual. Policies and practices highlighted by both girls and staff warrant attention and help inform standards of care discussions. The listening sessions will inform the work of NGI, including the selection of national advisory board members and their agenda, a clearinghouse of information and resources, specialized training and technical assistance to stakeholders, and the development of standards of care for girls across the continuum of services.

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