

Texas Criminal Justice Coalition

PRESS RELEASE

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TEXAS FAILING TRAUMATIZED GIRLS

New report reveals insufficient support for victims of domestic violence and other trauma

AUSTIN – October is National Domestic Violence Awareness month, and a new report released today shows how Texas is failing many domestic violence survivors in the state’s juvenile justice system. Half of the girls interviewed by the Texas Criminal Justice Coalition (TCJC) for the report say that their experiences in state and county secure facilities have not been helpful – or, for many, actually did more harm than good – in dealing with past trauma in their lives.

“Most of the children in our juvenile justice system are carrying invisible wounds from past traumatic events,” Benet Magnuson, a policy attorney for TCJC, said. “Sadly, our interviews show Texas has a long way to go in providing support services for girls in the system.”

Over half of all youth referred to the Texas juvenile justice system report significant past trauma, such as sexual abuse or domestic violence. A youth’s past experience with trauma is a major predictor of the youth’s assignment to increasingly severe placements in the Texas juvenile system. Without interventions, traumatized youth are also at high risk for school problems and substance abuse.

“The worst part is the girls who said the juvenile justice system is actually making their trauma worse,” TCJC Executive Director Dr. Ana-Yáñez Correa said. “Texas needs to take a hard look at its policies so we stop re-traumatizing these youth. We should train staff to reduce the use of seclusions and restraints, and we should provide more therapeutic services.”

The interviews, conducted at the Ron Jackson state secure facility for girls, sought feedback about experiences in both state and county confinement. Responses, especially in regard to the state facility, also revealed problems

with negative staff interactions, severe isolation from family, and youth-on-youth safety fears. The report lists recommendations for state leaders to address these problems, which closely match the [problems identified by boys at the Giddings state facility during a TCJC survey](#) there earlier this year.

“These are system-wide problems at our state juvenile facilities, and we need a system-wide response,” Magnuson said. “Legislators should support diverting more youth to community programs, and they should encourage the effective implementation of trauma-informed policies at both the state and local level.”

Girls’ Experiences in the Texas Juvenile Justice System is available at www.texascjc.org/girls-experiences-system.

Key findings and recommendations from the report are listed below.

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The Texas Criminal Justice Coalition (TCJC) works with peers, policy-makers, practitioners, and community members to identify and promote smart justice policies that safely reduce the state’s costly over-reliance on incarceration – creating stronger families, less taxpayer waste, and safer communities.

KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Girls in the Texas juvenile justice system do not receive sufficient help to deal with past trauma in their lives.

Forty-six percent of the surveyed girls report that the staff, programs, and treatment in county juvenile facilities did not help them deal with past trauma in their lives; an additional four percent said their time in the county facilities actually did more harm than good in dealing with past trauma. Thirty percent report that their time in the state secure facility has not been helpful in dealing with past trauma; an additional eight percent said the state facility has done more harm than good.

RECOMMENDATION: Support the effective implementation of trauma-informed programs at both county and state juvenile facilities to support rehabilitation and avoid re-traumatizing youth. Review and revise all policies and procedures to respond better to the vulnerabilities and triggers of traumatized youth.

Negative interactions with staff are the least helpful part of the juvenile justice system; they are also the number one thing girls want changed in the juvenile justice system.

The surveyed girls report that inconsistent discipline and insulting comments from staff are the biggest barrier to their rehabilitation and future success. The girls also

recommend changes to release procedures to reduce the long lengths of stay in the secure facility.

RECOMMENDATION: Expand staff training programs to build positive, respectful relationships between youth and staff. Bexar County’s Seclusion and Restraint Reduction Initiative provides staff with tools to foster better interactions with youth, which has successfully reduced both staff-on-youth and youth-on-youth violence in its secure facilities.

Therapeutic programs are the most helpful part of the juvenile justice system in preparing girls for their future.

The surveyed girls specifically identify Aggression Replacement Training, the PAWS canine program, substance abuse counseling, and behavior group counseling as the most helpful programs to their rehabilitation. Girls identify education as the second most helpful part of the juvenile justice system.

RECOMMENDATION: Increase funding for the coordination of local therapeutic resources and juvenile justice programs at the state and county level.

[Click here for additional findings and recommendations.](#)
