

**Testimony Submitted to the United States Senate  
Committee on the Judiciary  
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Inspiring all girls  
to be strong,  
smart, and bold<sup>SM</sup>

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Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony in support of S. 1197, the Violence Against Women Act of 2005. My name is Joyce Roché, and I am the President and CEO of Girls Incorporated, the national non-profit youth organization that inspires all girls to be strong, smart, and bold. On behalf of Girls Inc., our 80 United States affiliates, and the girls that we serve, I want to thank Chairman Specter and Senators Biden and Hatch for their leadership as original co-sponsors of S. 1197, which brings long-needed attention to violence in girls' lives. I also thank the many members of the committee who have already offered their sponsorship and support for this critical legislation.

**Girls Incorporated has become involved in this reauthorization for one simple reason: violence against women often begins as violence against girls. Though we do not like to face this reality, girls are victims of domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, and stalking. S. 1197 provides resources to support direct services to young victims of violence, as well as supports for communities to create systemic responses.**

We believe in the Girls Inc. Girls' Bill of Rights, which states that all girls have the right to be safe in the world. Unfortunately, we know that this right is frequently violated by violence that girls experience in their schools, communities, homes, and relationships. We consistently hear from girls that they are concerned about violence. Our Girls' Advisory Board—a group of high school and college-aged Girls Inc. alumnae—has identified violence against girls as one of four priority issues. Last year, 81% of girls who responded to an online survey on our website identified violence against girls and women as a very important issue in their lives. And when we listen to their stories, we understand why.

Consider the story of Azyia McLaughlin, a 17-year-old girl who was a program participant at Girls Inc. of Wilmington, NC. Azyia was a senior in high school with incredible promise; she dreamed of attending college and then pharmacy school. In pursuit of these dreams she worked several part time jobs and took a community college course in addition to her regular high-school coursework. But on a Tuesday morning last October, Azyia's dreams ended when her ex-boyfriend came to her house before school and shot and killed her. Like many victims of dating violence, Azyia repeatedly tried to leave what she knew was a controlling and violent relationship. Her boyfriend pursued her relentlessly, even threatening to take his own life if she did not come back to him. As if the loss of this young life weren't terrible enough, Azyia was the third female in three months killed by a former partner in the Wilmington area.

Statistics show that violent dating relationships like Azyia's are prevalent and often begin earlier in the victims' lives than we would like to admit. Although not all of these relationships end so tragically, national research suggests that 1 in 5 high-school girls is physically or sexually abused by a dating partner.<sup>1</sup> The Department of Justice consistently finds that girls and young women between the ages of 16 and 24 experience the highest rate of nonfatal intimate partner violence.<sup>2</sup> Besides harming their physical well-being and sometimes endangering their lives, this violence has other devastating effects on girls. Girls who are victims of dating violence are significantly more likely to engage in high-risk behaviors, including substance abuse, unhealthy weight control practices, risky sexual behaviors, and delinquency.<sup>3</sup> Girls who are victims of dating violence are more likely than those who are not to have low self-esteem and post-traumatic stress disorder.<sup>4</sup> And while we know that boys can be victims of dating violence, too, in terms of injuries and fear, the consequences of dating violence are more severe for girls and young women than for boys and young men.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Halpern, C.T., Oslak, S.G., Young, M.L., Martin, S.L., & Kupper, L.L. (2001). Partner violence among adolescents in opposite sex romantic relationships: Findings from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health. *American Journal of Public Health, 91*, 1679-1685.

<sup>2</sup> Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, "Intimate Partner Violence and Age of Victim, 1993-1999." October 2001.

<sup>3</sup> Silverman, J.G., Raj, A., Mucci, L.A., & Hathaway, J.E. (2001). Dating violence against adolescent girls and associated substance use, unhealthy weight control, sexual risk behavior, pregnancy, and suicidality. *Journal of the American Medical Association, 286*, 372-379.

<sup>4</sup> Callahan, M.R., Tolman, R.M., & Saunders, D.G. (2003). Adolescent dating violence victimization and psychological well-being. *Adolescent Research, 18*, 664-681.

<sup>5</sup> Capaldi, D. M., & Owen, L. D. (2001). Physical aggression in a community sample of at-risk young couples: gender comparisons for high frequency, injury, and fear. *Journal of Family Psychology, 15*, 425-440.

Girls also experience high rates of sexual assault with many negative consequences. The age at which a female is at greatest risk for rape or sexual assault is 14.<sup>6</sup> Over half of all sexual assaults reported to law enforcement are of minors, under the age of 18.<sup>7</sup> A U.S. Department of Education study found that there were 628 rapes or attempted rapes and 4,261 cases of sexual battery other than rape on public school grounds during the 1999-2000 school year.<sup>8</sup> This sexual violence is often perpetrated by people whom girls know and trust. A survey of victim-offender relationships of sexual assaults of young women 12-17 years demonstrated that in 86% of the cases the perpetrator was someone known to the victim as an acquaintance, an intimate partner, or a family member.<sup>9</sup> Sexual violence has incredible reverberations in a girl's life. Girls and young women who report having been raped or sexually assaulted are five times more likely to report depression and substance use and four times more likely to report delinquency than girls and young women who have not been abused.<sup>10</sup>

Consider this story, which Girls Inc. member Shannon Eaves shared on Capitol Hill this year:

*My friend was raped repeatedly by a trusted adult in her community when she was a young teen. She tried to tell her family and members of the community, but no one believed her. Not even her mother. People called her a liar and took her abuser's side. My friend courageously went to the police, and the man who raped her was put in jail, but not for long. People helped get him out of jail after only a few months. My friend thought she was doing the right thing by ignoring her abuser's threats and speaking out. But she expressed to me that she had feelings of shame, embarrassment, and sadness, even though she was the victim.*

*As more and more people discovered what happened, her mother started to change. She began to discipline my*

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<sup>6</sup> Snyder, H.N. (2000). *Sexual assault of young children as reported to law enforcement*. U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics (NCJ 182990). Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office.

<sup>7</sup> Finkelhor, David and Ormrod, Richard *Characteristics of Crimes Against Juveniles*, Juvenile Justice Bulletin, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, U.S. Department of Justice, June 2000.

<sup>8</sup> Miller, Amanda K. and Chandler, Kathryn. 2003. "Violence in U.S. Public Schools: 2000 School Survey on Crime and Safety. National Center for Education Statistics. U.S. Department of Education. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office.

<sup>9</sup> Tjaden, P., & Thoennes, N. (1998). *Prevalence, incidence, and consequences of violence against women: Findings from the National Violence Against Women Survey*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice.

<sup>10</sup> Kilpatrick, D.G., Ruggiero, K.J., Acierno, R., Saunders, B.E., Resnick, H.S., & Best, C.L. (2003). Violence and risk of PTSD, major depression, substance abuse/dependence, and comorbidity: Results from the National Survey of Adolescents. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 71, 692-700.

*friend very harshly and eventually kicked her out of her house. Some of my other friends and I put some money together so she could stay in a motel until she found another place to stay. But what if we did not have the resources to help her stay in a motel for a couple nights? I can only imagine how many other girls have experienced acts of violence and had nowhere to turn.*

Shannon’s story illustrates the difficulty that girls face as victims. Girls find themselves in a different place—developmentally *and* legally—and like Shannon’s friend, many girls who are victims find that there are few, if any, places to turn for help. Few organizations or programs exist to provide services for young victims, and many existing organizations do not have the capacity currently to meet girls’ needs. S. 1197 addresses this lack of services by providing competitive grant funding to organizations specifically to address domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, and stalking among teens and young adults.

Girls also face difficult legal issues, and confusion about the law is one of the most significant barriers to teens seeking help with domestic and dating violence.<sup>11</sup> State laws vary widely, meaning that not all teen victims of dating and domestic violence are able to obtain protection orders. In some states, teens can access the court system, however, they must have an adult petition on their behalf. We are glad to see that S. 1197 will build on the success of the Violence Against Women Act and provide communities with resources to support collaborations between courts, advocates, law enforcement, and other parties to develop systems to respond more effectively to the effects of these types of violence on legal minors.

## **Girls Are Witness to Domestic Violence**

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We know that young people—girls and boys—are affected by the violence that they witness in their homes. Between 3 and 10 million children in the United States witness crime in the home each year.<sup>12</sup> And nearly half (43%) of the households where domestic violence occurs include at least one child under 12 years of age.<sup>13</sup> The effects of witnessing such violence are both immediate and long-term. For girls, witnessing violence is associated with multiple problems, including depression and post-

<sup>11</sup> Veronique Autphenne, Amy Gluckim, and Ellen Iverson, *Teen Relationship Abuse: Regional Needs Assessment*. Children’s Hospital/Los Angeles, Division of Adolescent Medicine, funded by the California Department of Health Services, Maternal and Child Health Branch/Domestic Violence Section, 2000.

<sup>12</sup> Carlson, Bonnie E. (1984). Children’s observations of interpersonal violence. Pp. 147-167 in A.R. Roberts (Ed.) *Battered women and their families* (pp. 147-167). NY: Springer. Straus, M.A. (1992). Children as witnesses to marital violence: A risk factor for lifelong problems among a nationally representative sample of American men and women. *Report of the Twenty-Third Ross Roundtable*. Columbus, OH: Ross Laboratories.

<sup>13</sup> U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics. (2001). *Intimate partner violence and age of victim, 1993-1999*. Retrieved March 23, 2004 from <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/abstract/ipva99.htm>

traumatic stress disorder, substance abuse, antisocial behavior, and juvenile delinquency.<sup>14</sup> Most importantly, we know that without intervention, children who witness violence in the home grow up to perpetuate these behaviors, creating a cycle of violence in our society. Girls who are exposed to violence in the home are at an increased risk for becoming victims of domestic violence, whereas boys are at an increased risk for becoming perpetrators.<sup>15</sup>

I have heard too many stories about girls suffering from family violence and the cycle that develops. One that particularly moved me was from a Girls Inc. member from Holyoke, MA, who at 17 has already witnessed and experienced a great deal of violence in her life. This young woman grew up in a very violent home, where her father regularly abused her mother, herself, and her two younger sisters. She once watched her father beat her mother's head into a door, smashing it so hard that it left a hole in the door. Not surprisingly, this girl grew up to be a victim of violence in her own relationships. At 14, she found herself in an abusive relationship. She had the courage to break up with him, but when she went to retrieve some of her things from his house, he raped and beat her. Her boyfriend assaulted her one other time after that, and whenever he saw her on the street he would harass her. Her story demonstrates how critical it is for us to intervene in this cycle.

S. 1197 does a great deal to intervene and break this cycle of violence. This legislation addresses the needs of girls and boys who witness violence in their homes through support for direct services for these children. In addition, S. 1197 supports violence prevention programs that will reach more girls and boys, helping them be as safe as possible from domestic and sexual violence, and learn to recognize positive, non-violent relationships. Our own experience with Girls Inc. Project BOLD<sup>®</sup>, our research-based violence prevention and safety awareness curriculum for girls, has shown the critical importance of providing girls with information, skills, and resources that they need to stay safe and seek help if they experience violence, all delivered by caring adults in a supportive environment.

### **Girls Are Often Re-traumatized in the Juvenile Justice System**

Unfortunately, many girls who experience and witness violence are not receiving help to deal with the consequences, resulting in significant costs to our society. One of the greatest costs is the increased entry of girls into the juvenile justice system. As I mentioned earlier, girls who experience

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<sup>14</sup> Groves, B.M. (2002). *Children who see too much: Lessons from the Child Witness to Violence Project*. Boston, MA: Beacon.

<sup>15</sup> Whitfield, C., Anda, R., Dube, S., & Felitti, V. (2003). Violent childhood experiences and the risk of intimate partner violence as adults. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 18*, 166-186.

dating violence and sexual assault are more likely to act out and engage in delinquent behavior.

In fact, 40 to 70 percent of girls in the juvenile justice system have been victims of physical or sexual abuse.<sup>16</sup> Often, they are re-traumatized by their entry into the system. If we want to have any hope of rehabilitating these girls, we must ensure that they are receiving the services that they need to deal with the trauma and victimization that they have experienced. Programs that include health and mental-health services and treatment for physical or sexual assault and abuse are necessary to respond to the trauma they have experienced. S. 1197 will restore language in the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act that addressed the influx of girls into the juvenile justice system. This language was embedded in a larger program that was eliminated in the 2002 reauthorization and simply directs states to provide needed services to girls in the system.

There are many more statistics and each has a story behind it. But, in closing, I would like to share the words of Zanae Cook, a 14-year-old member of Girls Inc. of Philadelphia who recently wrote about being harassed by some girls on a city bus and why she understood her peers' violent behavior. She said, "Sometimes it feels as if the whole world is like the adults on that bus, pretending that there's nothing wrong until someone gets hurt. And then there are lots of questions like 'How could this have happened?' and headlines about girls becoming more violent. Adults need to take responsibility and help kids cope with violence, fear and powerlessness."

Too often, girls are left to deal with violence alone, without sufficient programs available to meet their needs. S. 1197 is a huge step toward addressing violence in girls' lives and building a safer world for all girls. Thank you for bringing attention to this issue and taking responsibility for what we as a society must do to respond to violence in girls' lives.

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<sup>16</sup> Acoca, L., & Austin, J. (1996). *The crisis: Women in prison*. San Francisco, CA: National Council on Crime and Delinquency.