

**Statement of**

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**Hampton, Virginia**

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**Subcommittee on Crime, Terrorism, and Homeland Security**

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**Hearing on**

**Girls in the Juvenile Justice System:**

**Strategies to Help Girls Fulfill Their Full Potential**

**October 20, 2009**



Inspiring all girls to be strong, smart, and bold<sup>SM</sup>

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Gohmert, and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to offer this testimony regarding girls in the juvenile justice system. My name is Jackie Jackson, and I am the Executive Director of Girls Incorporated of the Greater Peninsula, the non-profit youth organization that inspires all girls to be strong, smart, and bold. On behalf of Girls Inc. and the girls we serve, I want to thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today about the importance of primary prevention in keeping girls from entering the juvenile justice system.

Girls Incorporated of the Greater Peninsula has been serving girls on the Peninsula for over 60 years. Our local affiliate was incorporated as the Girls Club of the Greater Peninsula, Virginia in 1947. However, when Girls Clubs of America changed its name to Girls Incorporated in 1990, we in turn changed our name to Girls Inc. Last year, over 1100 girls benefited from Girls Inc. national research-based programs that address media literacy, economic literacy, sexual health, substance abuse, violence prevention, sports, and science, math and technology in four local Girls Inc. sites, schools, and during community workshops. Based on our long history of service to girls, we are honored to provide our perspective to you today.

## **Introduction**

As you will hear from other witnesses before you, representation of girls in the juvenile justice system has been on the rise for 20 years, even as overall juvenile crime has decreased. In fact, between 1985 and 2002, the overall delinquency caseload for females increased 92%, while it decreased 29% for males.<sup>1</sup>

In coalition with other concerned organizations, the national office of Girls Inc. has put forth specific recommendations for changes in the federal Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act to improve conditions and services for adjudicated girls. These will be submitted to you separately by our national organization. Girls Inc. advocates diverting girls away from detention and into community-based youth programs whenever possible. We are also particularly concerned with the fate of status offenders, who are disproportionately girls, and often are incarcerated for technical violations despite the fact that they pose no safety threat to the community.

I join with other witnesses today in asking your attention to these critical issues. However, this afternoon, I want to speak to you about primary prevention, the most cost-effective way to address the problem of juvenile crime among girls.

## **First, generally speaking, we must invest in prevention.**

On school days, when the school bell rings, 15 million children and youth are released from school without adult supervision.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, the hours between school dismissal and dinnertime become high-risk hours for juvenile crime, and for youth becoming victims of violence and other dangers.

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<sup>1</sup> Snyder, Howard N., and Sickmund, Melissa. (2006). *Juvenile Offenders and Victims: 2006 National Report*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

<sup>2</sup> "America After 3 PM: The most in-depth study of how America's children spend their afternoons." Afterschool Alliance. October 2009.

Indeed, according to FBI Crime statistics, juvenile crime peaks during the afterschool hours of 3pm to 6pm, for both boys and girls. In addition, being unsupervised afterschool doubles the risk that an eighth grader will smoke, drink, or abuse drugs. And the afterschool hours are the most common time for teens to become pregnant.<sup>3</sup>

Girls Inc. and other programs like ours fill that gap by providing transportation, positive adult role models, and a safe environment for the children of working families. We serve girls from 2pm to 6pm during the school year, and from 6am to 6pm during the summer. Some Girls Inc. affiliates serve dinner to girls, and all serve as a second home for those who lack family and economic stability in their lives.

But quality prevention does not mean just a place to 'store' children and teens with a ping-pong table and a television set. Girls at Girls Inc. participate in research-based programs that stimulate and nurture and maximize their healthy intellectual and emotional development. In addition to homework help, we provide positive life skills and social skills that help children adopt positive peer groups and succeed in school, which promotes engagement, and in turn reduces truancy and other negative outcomes.

And we know prevention programs work. Scientific evaluations of youth programs have shown reductions in vandalism, assaults, drug activity, and juvenile arrests when compared to a control group.<sup>4</sup> For Girls Inc., a 2001 experimental-design evaluation of Friendly PEERsuasion<sup>®</sup>, our substance-abuse prevention program, found that girls who participated were more likely than nonparticipants to avoid situations where peers were smoking, drinking, or using drugs. And, one month after completion of the program, only 22% of girls ages 11 to 12 reported involvement with abusive substances, compared with 40% of girls who did not participate in the program.

In addition to bettering the lives of children, prevention programs save money. In my own community, according to the Hampton Court Services Unit, the average yearly cost to house a child in one of their facilities is \$51,000. Nationwide estimates for secure detention range from \$32,000-\$65,000 per year. In contrast, one year of comprehensive afterschool and summer programming at Girls Inc. costs less than \$2,000. Even considering the average stay in a detention center for a Hampton Roads youth of 30 days, that cost is still more than twice the cost of a full year of programming at Girls Inc.

However, despite the obvious return on investment of these programs, we at Girls Inc. and other similar organizations are struggling to continue our programs. Families come to us routinely that do not have the ability to pay for our programs, especially during these difficult economic times. We try to make Girls Inc. affordable for them by charging only \$5/day. For us to maintain the quality of staff and programming required by our national organization, we need investments from Congress and the community.

Girls Inc. commends you, Chairman Scott, as well as other supporters for your work in supporting evidence-based prevention strategies through the Youth Promise Act.<sup>5</sup> All children are at heightened risk of becoming involved in juvenile crime or becoming a victim of crime as well as other dangers while unsupervised during after school time. Therefore, it is important to have best practices and strategies

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<sup>3</sup> Newman, Sanford A., James Alan Fox, Edward A. Flynn, and William Christenson. "America's Afterschool Choice: The Prime Time for Juvenile Crime or Youth Enrichment and Achievement." *Fight Crime: Invest in Kids*. p. 7-9. 2000.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Youth PROMISE Act, H.R. 1064, 111th Cong. Print.

that will direct young people toward productive and law-abiding alternatives to negative behaviors. Thank you for your leadership in this area.

**Second, prevention should be gender-specific.**

As I suspect you will hear from other witnesses today, research points to significant differences in the male and female offender populations. Girls commit fewer violent offenses than boys. They are more likely to be status offenders. And, girls enter the juvenile justice system with a disturbing history of emotional, physical, and sexual abuse—with estimates as high as 78% or higher of incarcerated girls.

Clearly, prevention programs should not be one-size-fits-all.

Our Girls Inc. Preventing Adolescent Pregnancy Program and new Girls Inc. BeBOLD program provide a forum for discussing child abuse with trained professional staff in an all-girl environment. It is critically important for girls to feel safe in order to do education about these and other issues. It is imperative that girls understand their innocence and their rights and get the help that they need.

In addition, according to the Girls Study Group commissioned by the U.S. Department of Justice to investigate this population, family dynamics may be contributing to gender differences in juvenile arrests for assault. Research indicates that girls fight with family members or siblings more frequently than boys, who are more likely to fight with friends or strangers. Some research suggests that girls are three times as likely as boys to assault a family member.<sup>6</sup> Prevention programs designed for boys will fail to address these issues adequately for girls.

Finally, substance abuse prevention programs must be gender-specific as well. Girls' substance use rates have now caught up to those of boys. However, according to recent research by the Center for Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University, there are key differences in girls' and boys' motivations for using substances. For example, girls are more likely to access substances from an older boyfriend. And girls are more likely to use substances to manage stress or to lose weight, including methamphetamines. Prevention programs for girls must address healthy relationships, anxiety, and body image issues in order to meet the differential needs of girls.<sup>7</sup>

Unfortunately, however, our nation affords far too little attention to vulnerable girls. When I contacted our otherwise excellent sheriff's department in Hampton, they could not even provide me with data breakdowns for juvenile crime by gender. When they did quickly provide breakdowns of the 11 most violent offenses for the last year, girls' numbers were up in six of them.

**Finally, prevention should be strength-based.**

As you can see from the courageous young women appearing before you today, young people involved in the juvenile justice system are smart and savvy and have bright futures. All children, whether or not

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<sup>6</sup> "Violence by Teenage Girls: Trends and Context." Girls Study Group. Office for Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, U.S. Department of Justice. May 2008.

<sup>7</sup> "The Formative Years: Pathways to Substance Abuse Among Girls. *CASA: The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University*. February 2003.

we call them “at-risk,” deserve positive programming, and not session after session of what they can’t or shouldn’t do.

At Girls Inc., we offer financial literacy programs that help girls learn about saving and investing and planning for a financially secure future.

At Girls Inc. we also offer media literacy, which helps girls be savvy consumers and recognize how advertising tries to manipulate them into buying things they may not need. Our media literacy program also helps girls see how music videos, lyrics, television shows, and movies glamorize sex, violence, and drugs.

But the most important thing about positive programming is that it is fun. Girls want to come. And at Girls Inc. we are in community centers, churches, and anywhere that girls are. This means that we often cross school boundaries. Girls get to know each other in a positive environment, working together, and they forget about which school or neighborhood they are from. When tensions may arise later between rival schools, Girls Inc. girls know each other as friends, and don’t feed into the false rumors and reputations that cause so much damage in our communities.

### **Conclusion**

I want to commend this committee for convening this hearing today, and especially for listening to the voices of girls who have been wronged by society and our systems. We should not delay in getting help to them and their peers, and investing in prevention to ensure that other girls can live the safe and carefree childhood that they deserve.