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FACT SHEET

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Girls' Courts

The first girls' court in the United States was opened in 2004 in New Mexico. The same year, Hawai'i opened its girls' court. The first girls' court in California opened in San Mateo County in 2006. There are currently ten girls' courts in California. Three of the ten girls' courts in California are specifically for CSEC survivors (commercially sexually exploited children).

What are Girls' Courts?

Girls' courts are juvenile courts that have a dedicated calendar and judge for female youth who may be exploited or have suffered from trauma or be at risk for these things. Some girls' courts are for any at-risk girl who enters the juvenile delinquency system while others are specifically for girls at risk of being involved with CSEC (Commercial Sexually Exploited Children) who have been arrested, especially for crimes related to their exploitation. The goal of a girls' court is to have an alternative track for these youth that recognizes their unique and gender-specific risks and needs. This track, like other collaborative courts, is meant to build on their strengths and reconnect them with healthy relationships and behaviors. The court focuses on providing services rather than on convictions or detentions.

Each girls' court may operate slightly differently from one another, but all follow collaborative justice principles of combining judicial supervision, often on a weekly or biweekly basis, with intensive social and treatment services to at-risk girls or girls who have been victimized or exploited. These collaborative justice principles include a multidisciplinary, nonadversarial team approach with involvement from justice system representatives, mental health providers, specialized trauma services, educational advocates, and other support systems in the community. Many girls' courts offer evening and Saturday programs for girls to have group therapy or to discuss things from self-worth and body image to the legal system and court process. Like all collaborative courts, girls' courts use a continuum of sanctions for repeat offenses or not adhering to program rules. However, girls' courts are also aware that exploitation is similar to domestic violence and thus girls may "AWOL" and return to their exploiter several times before leaving for good. Some courts use detention as a sanction more than other courts, depending on the jurisdiction's philosophy, politics, and culture.

Benefits of Girls' Court

Since juvenile court was designed for boys and do not traditionally take things like trauma into account, girls' courts may be better than traditional juvenile courts to serve girls impacted by trauma. Girls' courts address specific trauma that girls in the juvenile system encounter, as well as the female-specific reactions to that trauma. With the relative novelty of girls' courts, there is a dearth of research on girls' courts. The few formal and informal studies that have been done have suggested that girls' courts may lead to fewer incidents of running away and less time on the run when participants do run, as well as less time spent in detention. Evidence also suggests that girls' court participants have fewer re-arrests and greater educational success than their counterparts in delinquency court, and that the girls' court facilitated the participants in making connections with others with similar experiences and engaging in healthier behaviors.

Despite the dearth in research on girls' courts specifically, there is some evidence that gender-specific court responses in general have a positive effect. For example, gender-specific programs have shown positive outcomes in the areas of education, employment, interpersonal relationships, self-esteem, self-efficacy, self-awareness, body image, and social development.

Resources for Girls' Court

- Human Trafficking Cases in California's Courts
www.courts.ca.gov/documents/AOCBrief_Human_Traficking.pdf
- Trafficking Tool Kit for Judges
<http://www.courts.ca.gov/documents/human-trafficking-toolkit-cfcc.pdf>
- Juvenile Collaborative Court Models
Coming soon
- Girls' Court: A Gender Responsive Juvenile Court Alternative
<http://digitalcommons.law.seattleu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1777&context=sjsj>
- NY Times: A Court's All-Hands Approach Aids Girls Most at Risk
www.nytimes.com/2014/01/29/us/a-courts-all-hands-approach-aids-girls-most-at-risk.html?_r=0
- Hawai'i Girls' Court
www.girlscourt.org

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