

# FACT SHEET ON DOMESTIC VIOLENCE & THE CRIMINALIZATION OF GIRLS

## **Domestic violence can have devastating consequences for children.**

- An estimated 15.5 million children in the United States live in families in which partner violence occurred at least once in the past year. (McDonald, et al, 2006)
- A study on the effects of childhood stress on lifetime health found that as the frequency of witnessing domestic violence increased, the chance of alcoholism, substance abuse, depression and serious health problems also increased. (The Effects of Childhood Stress, 2008)
- Family conflict in general has a heightened impact on girls. This is likely due to a combination of the high rates at which girls experience family abuse and conflict, as well as the exacerbated effect of family conflict on them as a result of spending more time in the home and their gendered socialization to be particularly concerned about relationships and family. (Sherman, et al, 2015)
- Children who grow up in a violent home are more likely to be victims of child abuse. Those children who are not victims of direct violence have some of the same behavioral and psychological problems as children who are themselves physically abused. (Behind Closed Doors, 2006)
- Among victims of child abuse, 40% report domestic violence in the home. (Behind Closed Doors, 2006)
- One study in North America found that children who were exposed to violence in the home were 15 times more likely to be physically and/or sexually assaulted than the national average. (Behind Closed Doors, 2006)
- Several studies also reveal that children who witness domestic violence are more likely to be affected by violence as adults – either as victims or perpetrators. (Behind Closed Doors, 2006)

## **Children are often criminalized for behavior related to their experiences of violence in the home and their efforts to survive, compounding the harms created by domestic violence.**

- Growing up in abusive households can put children at risk for incarceration because their survival strategies are routinely criminalized. (Sherman, et al, 2015)
- From 1992 to 2012/2013, girls' share of arrests increased by 45% and girls' share of detention increased by 40%. Black girls were almost three times as likely as white girls to be referred to court. Black girls were also 20% more likely than white girls to be in detention, while Native girls were 50% more likely. (Sherman, et al, 2015)
- 84% of girls in juvenile detention have experienced family violence. Additionally, 31% experience sexual abuse, 41% experience physical abuse, and 39% experience emotional abuse. (Sherman, et al, 2015)
- When adolescents are arrested for domestic battery, girls were more likely than boys to be defending themselves from abuse by a parent or caregiver. (Sherman, et al, 2015)
- 40% of girls in juvenile detention identify as lesbian, bisexual, questioning/gender non-conforming, or transgender (LBQ/GNCT), and 85% of LBQ/GNCT girls in juvenile detention are girls of color. A California study found that 38% of LBQ/GNCT girls in detention had been removed from their homes because someone was hurting them, compared with 25% of their peers who do not identify as LBQ/GNCT. (Sherman, et al, 2015)
- An increasing number of girls are being arrested for violent behavior in their home. Researchers have attributed this increase to mandatory arrest or pro-arrest policies in cases of family-based assault. As a result of these policies, many girls are arrested for fights in their homes when defending themselves against victimization or as part of a pattern of violence among family members. (Sherman, et al, 2015)

Statistics collected by the Free Bresha campaign, a coalition of advocates and activists mobilizing to free Bresha Meadows from juvenile detention. Bresha Meadows of Ohio was just 14 years old when she was incarcerated and faced a charge of aggravated murder for defending herself and family against the unrelenting terror and abuse of her father. We act in solidarity with Bresha and demand that she is returned home to her family and that all charges against her are dropped.

Connect with the Free Bresha campaign at [freebresha.wordpress.com](http://freebresha.wordpress.com); [freebreshameadows@gmail.com](mailto:freebreshameadows@gmail.com); and @freebresha on facebook and twitter

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## Juvenile detention creates harmful health and emotional consequences for children and can increase their experiences of violence.

- Although some defend the practice of detaining victimized girls on the grounds that juvenile detention can provide protection or services, in fact, access to adequate services is severely limited, the system's processes can re-traumatize girls, and some incarcerated girls report that they experience new incidents of abuse while inside detention. (Saar, et al, 2015)
- Though 80% of girls in detention are diagnosed with mental health issues such as major depression and PTSD, very few detention facilities have licensed mental health counselors. Further, juvenile detention rarely meets medical needs related to sexual abuse that girls have experienced, including gynecological and obstetric care. (Saar, et al, 2015)
- Routine processes within juvenile detention, such as the use of restraints and strip searches, and the isolating, punitive environment, cause traumatizing stress symptoms. Shackling of youth during court proceedings is particularly damaging to girls because it can re-traumatize girls who have been physically or sexually abused or who have witnessed domestic violence. (Saar, et al, 2015)
- Girls also lack consistent legal representation to address the full range of their issues, including education, trauma, mental health, and family violence. (Saar, et al, 2015)
- Once in the juvenile detention system, LBQ/GNCT girls report higher levels of self-harming behavior and are more likely to be discriminated against, become targets of violence and sexual victimization, and be placed in isolation. (Sherman, et al, 2015)
- Thousands of youth are prosecuted in the adult system each year, some automatically through age of jurisdiction laws, some via prosecutorial or judicial discretion, and others through laws that mandate the transfer of cases to the adult systems if the child is being prosecuted for certain crimes. Girls in adult facilities do not receive even the bare minimum of rehabilitative and educational services that are provided in the juvenile justice system. Instead, they are placed in an environment more focused on punishment and control. These girls are at greater risk of suicide, physical and sexual abuse, isolation, and disruptions to their development, without any evidence that sending youth to the adult system actually produces safer communities. (Saar, et al, 2015)

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