



# INTERDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH LEADERS

## One Girl, Many Systems: Why a Blueprint for Action is Needed

### WHY WE DID THIS STUDY

In 2016, 581 girls were petitioned to courts in Pierce County, WA for noncriminal activities constituting, 10% of all girls petitioned to the courts for the same type of activities statewide (N=5,960). Some examples of these behaviors include running away, skipping school, or violating curfew or rules of probation. Girls engaging in these behaviors are unnecessarily referred to the justice system in a misguided attempt to obtain treatment services to address the underlying issues faced by girls such as histories of trauma, violence, behavioral health issues and economic vulnerability. High rates of girls' court involvement for non-criminal activities, which in some cases can lead to juvenile confinement, remains a significant social and public health problem in Pierce County as well as statewide. The goal of this project is to divert the girls at risk of, or currently involved in, status offending behavior away from the justice system by connecting them to community-based systems of care that can more effectively meet their needs.

### HOW WE DID THIS STUDY

Our research integrates a community-based participatory research (CBPR) approach with the Community Framework for System Change (CFSC) to enhance community involvement in deciding where and how to intervene to improve health outcomes of girls. The project brings the voices of the girls with lived experiences into the center of research activity and incorporates them with the views of other community members, organizational representatives, and researchers. Our findings and recommendations are derived from multiple sources of data: 1) a literature review; 2) administrative court data; 3) local court and school policies; 4) local adolescent health data; 5) interviews with school and court professionals, service providers, community members, organizational representatives (n=10); 6) two focus groups with high school girls at risk of court involvement (n=10) and with court-involved girls (n=7).

As a platform for ongoing community involvement, we established an advisory group consisting of people from Tacoma, Pierce County, including young women, service providers, school and court professionals, school district staff and a senator representing the community in the State Senate. The group relied on the community's voice, its expertise, and its experience. The result of the research is a countywide Blueprint for Action, released in May 2020 that community members in Pierce County can use to build up a new system of synchronized, community-based care to divert the girls at risk of or currently involved in status offenses away from the justice system.

### KEY FINDINGS

- In 2016, 581 girls (ages 10-17) were petitioned to courts in Pierce County for status offenses.
- Between 2010 and 2016, the status offense referrals rates for girls increased by **84%**
- Majority of court-involved girls faced multiple stressors:
  - 75%** witnessed violence
  - 44%** experienced physical violence
  - 40%** experienced sexual violence

## WHAT WE FOUND

### Administrative Court Data

In 2016, 581 girls were petitioned to family and juvenile courts in Pierce County for status offenses. The majority of these girls were petitioned to courts for skipping school (90%). Between 2010 and 2016, the net increase in the status offense referrals rates for girls in Pierce was **84%**. For boys, this increase was **65%**.

### Qualitative Data

Adults who work with girls at school and court noted limited awareness and focused attention on meeting the unique needs of girls. When girls are identified early as being in need of support, there are limited prevention resources and services available. Some resources have narrow eligibility requirements, excluding girls who could benefit from them.

Community members highlighted a need to improve training for all professional staff that come into contact with girls, from school personnel, service providers to court professionals, attorney, and probation managers.

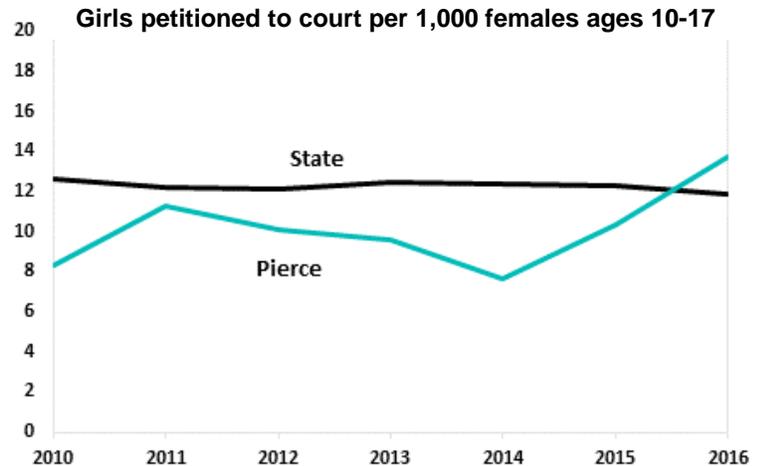
Girls, through focus group interviews, noted that they feel targeted by school dress codes and the unequal application of school rules. They appreciated that adults gave them more latitude for misbehavior and simultaneously view this leeway as lack of care and willingness to engage with them. Girls say they need space to process experiences and cool down. This need for “safe space” is a reason for missing or leaving school. Family (using a broad, inclusive definition) are huge motivators and should be engaged in problem solving. Girls highlighted the need for “self-advocacy” training opportunities for young women to navigate the issues they face and find solutions.



The photo was acquired from <https://www.istockphoto.com>

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

This brief was authored by Ann Muno (Justice for Girls Coalition of Washington State), Arina Gertseva (Washington State Administrative Office of the Courts), and Sarah Veele (Washington State Department of Children, Youth, and Families). They are 2017 Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Interdisciplinary Research Leaders fellows. For questions, please contact: Arina Gertseva ([Arina.Gertseva@courts.wa.gov](mailto:Arina.Gertseva@courts.wa.gov)).



The graph above depicts court referral rates for non-criminal behaviors (truancy, at-risk youth, and children-in-need of services) for girls ages 10-17 in Pierce County as well as statewide for each year between 2010 and 2016.

## WHAT THESE FINDINGS MEAN

Pierce County has an ongoing challenge to support female youth at risk of entering the justice system and to support their well-being through community-based programs. The inherent complexity of girls’ needs combined with an absence of a comprehensive regional policy and programming demonstrates the need for a strategic plan for the stakeholders in Pierce.

The community makes it very clear that a new approach is needed. The result of the research is a countywide Blueprint for Action, the strategic plan that lays out cross-sector tailored solutions. The development of this plan was guided by the Public Health Model that prioritizes not only services for those girls who are at risk of court involvement, on probation, or are transitioning back to the community, but also the services targeted toward all the girls in the community.

The Strategic Plan is a living document and will continue to be refined. It is anticipated that this document will be reviewed and updated periodically, including updating the strategies to reflect the specific and changing needs of Pierce County. This document can be used as a whole, but also in parts based on specific recommendations. The Strategic Plan provides a model for other Washington state counties to potentially replicate.