

Girls, Justice, and Advocacy: Using Arts-Based Public Health Strategies to Challenge Gender Inequities in Juvenile Justice

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Abstract : Girls in the U.S. juvenile justice system are most often arrested for truancy, drug use, or running from home, all of which are symptoms of abuse. In fact, some have called this 'The Sexual Abuse to Prison Pipeline.' Such abuse has consequences for girls' health, education, employment, and parenting, often resulting in significant health disparities. Yet when arrested, girls rarely encounter services designed to meet their unique needs. Instead, they are expected to cope with a system that was historically designed for males. In fact, even literature advocating for increased gender equity frequently fails to include girls' voices and firsthand accounts. In response to these combined injustices, public health researchers launched a trauma-informed creative writing intervention in a southern juvenile detention facility. The program was designed to improve the health of detained girls, while also establishing innovative methods of both data collection and social justice advocacy. Girls' poems and letters were collected and coded, adding rich qualitative data to traditional survey responses. In addition, as part of the intervention, these poems are regularly published by international literary publisher Sarabande Books—and distributed to judges, city leaders, attorneys, state representatives, and more. By utilizing a creative medium, girls generated substantial civic engagement with their concerns—thus expanding their influence and improving policy advocacy efforts. Researchers hypothesized that having access to their communities and policy makers would provide its own health benefits for incarcerated girls: cultivating self-esteem, locus of control, and a sense of leadership. This paper discusses the establishment of this intervention, examines findings from its evaluation, and includes several girls' poems as exemplars. Grounded in social science regarding expressive writing, stigma, muted group theory, and health promotion, the paper theorizes about the application of arts-based advocacy efforts to other social justice endeavors.

Keywords : advocacy, public health, social justice, women's health

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