



# Status of Girls Well-Being in Florida

## Executive Summary

Vanessa Patino Lydia, MPA  
Vinessa Gordon, MPH

of the Delores Barr Weaver Policy Center

September 2019



### **About the Delores Barr Weaver Policy Center**

The Policy Center is a private not-for-profit organization and an outgrowth of the Justice for Girls Movement that began in Florida more than 15 years ago. With national recognition for its work, the mission of the Policy Center is to engage communities, organizations, and individuals through quality research, advocacy, training and model programming to advance the rights of girls and young women and youth who identify as female, especially those impacted by the justice system. The goal of the Policy Center's girl-centered research inquiry is to ensure that policies, programs, and services are informed by the best available data trends and grounded in the experiences of girls and young women. The Policy Center partners with girls to provide services and interventions across systems (school, diversion, detention, probation, court, lock-up, re-entry).

Since the Policy Center opened in 2013, the research team has published numerous research reports focusing on girls in the juvenile justice system. The research has led to the Policy Center's ongoing strategic reform planning, the development and implementation of pilot intervention models serving girls, and the passage of fundamental and historic legislation. The Policy Center's community reform model is highlighted in the *Georgetown Journal of Law and Policy*. The research helps communities better understand the issues their girls face, as well as provides a platform to advocate for more resources, changes to policy and/or practice, and create interventions that support girls' health and future opportunities.

<https://www.seethegirl.org>

### **About Florida Women's Funding Alliance**

Florida Women's Funding Alliance (FWFA), an affinity group of Florida Philanthropic Network (FPN), envisions a Florida where women and girls thrive. The FWFA mission is to transform the lives of women and girls through members' collective voices and resources. FWFA offers FPN members an opportunity to interact and connect with other staff and board members of foundations and other grantmaking organizations working to transform the lives of women and girls in Florida.

<https://www.fpnetwork.org/fwfa>

### **About Florida Philanthropic Network**

Florida Philanthropic Network is a statewide association of grantmakers working to build philanthropy to build a better Florida. FPN's members are private independent, corporate and family foundations, community foundations, public charity grantmakers and corporate giving programs - from Miami to Jacksonville; Naples to Pensacola - who hold more than \$6.5 billion in assets and invest more than \$430 million annually (excluding members located outside Florida) to improve the quality of life for our citizens. FPN members share a commitment to promoting philanthropy, fostering collaboration and advancing public policy in Florida.

<https://www.fpnetwork.org>

*Images by Andrea Bottin Photography*

*Any published findings and conclusions are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position of the Florida Department of Health.*

*The Florida Youth Survey data used in this report were collected by the Florida Department of Health (DOH). The views expressed herein are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the DOH.*



*The Status of Girls Well-Being in Florida* report is the second in a research series of three publications on the status of girls across Florida's counties. This report series was commissioned by the Florida Women's Funding Alliance, an affinity group of the Florida Philanthropic Network. This publication builds on the first publication's assessment of the educational status and disparities among girls and young women in Florida.

This research shines light on the experiences of girls, with particular attention to those who are less visible. We know that girls who experience positive experiences of connection and opportunities in their communities, schools, and home lives can thrive. Girls spend a majority of their time in school, but we know less about what is happening outside the school that impacts their overall well-being, educational, and health futures. Likewise, when opportunities of connection

are not available, girls are pushed further away and may disengage from their family, community, school, or even themselves.

**Well-being is what we wish for all children. In the context of this research, well-being refers to school connectedness, safety, access to safe adults, including parents and teachers, freedom from violence and victimization in their homes, schools, and community, and girls' overall health and emotional well-being indicators.**

Across communities in Florida, the experiences of girls in middle and high school are examined on a variety of indicators of well-being. These indicators are critical for policymakers, educators,



providers, and parents, but often data is not analyzed by gender and race/ethnicity. This research does not suggest or imply that boys' needs are less important. It does submit, however, that looking at the research through a gender-based lens creates opportunities for responses towards girls that may be more relevant/responsive to their lives. Girls and young women who witness and/or are exposed to violence have a higher risk than boys of internalizing the experiences, and this can threaten their well-being during adolescence and into adulthood. The impact during adolescence may lead to girls engaging in self-harming behaviors (suicide, substance abuse) or other coping or survival behaviors that put them at risk of juvenile justice system involvement.

The research entailed reviewing the survey data of girls in middle and high school as well as data reports from the Florida Department of Health, Florida Department of Children and Families, Florida Department of Juvenile Justice, and examining the critical intersection of race, gender, and geography. Girls' indicators of well-being cannot be separated from their experiences in school or in their homes and communities. For this reason, researchers examined important indicators linked to

well-being (connectedness, emotional health, self-harm behaviors) for girls that are related to their life experiences.

The power of analyzing the data through multiple lenses increases our understanding of what is happening to all girls and compels us to dig beneath the surface.

## Key Findings

**The data shows that the safety of many girls is compromised and that there are alarming rates of violence and victimization experienced by girls in their communities, schools, and homes. The rates of hopelessness, suicide ideation, and substance use among girls compel our communities and state to take action. Further, this information enables us to assess and reframe our response to ensure girls are not left behind.** The differences for and among girls are important—as they suggest different interventions for engaging girls who are falling behind. The results show what is going well and highlights disparate issues facing subsets of girls who are mostly invisible and who experience indicators that warrant attention. As a state, it allows us to assess where we are and to ensure that our

responses to girls are supportive and help connect them to their communities rather than rely on exclusionary responses, police interventions, or juvenile justice system responses.

## Girls' Experiences in the Community

- *Safety in neighborhood:* Regardless of whether they were in middle or high school, 13% of girls do not feel safe. This finding provokes a deeper look into what girls may be witnessing or experiencing in their neighborhoods on a regular basis.
- *Forced sexual intercourse (Rape):* One in 10 girls report being forced to have sexual intercourse. Differences by race/ethnicity reveal that 20% of Native Hawaiian, 17% of American Indian/Native American, 9% of White, 9% of Hispanic, 8% of African American, and 3% of Asian girls report forced sexual intercourse experiences. Differences by sexual orientation reveal that 20% of girls who identified as bisexual, 14% of girls that were "unsure" of their sexual identity, 12% of gay or lesbian girls, and 6% of girls that identified as heterosexual reported being forced to have sexual intercourse when they did not want to. The effects of sexual victimization can be long lasting. Victims are more likely to experience Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), major depressive episodes, and drug abuse as adults.
- *Teen pregnancy by older male partners:* In 2018, there were a total of 2,457 births to mothers under the age of 18. Of these births to mothers under the age of 18, the father's age was not reported (not available) in 41% of the birth certificates. More significantly, the data found that the younger the girl, the less likely the age of the father to be reported (e.g. 80% of births to mothers age 13 and younger did not have age of father listed on birth certificate). Of the births with ages known, 17%

were by fathers under the age of 18. Additionally, of birth certificates with ages known, 10% of births to teen mothers fell within unlawful/statutory violations due to the age of consent for girl and/or age disparity by Florida law.

- *Victims of commercial sexual exploitation:* Sex trafficking of children in Florida is prevalent. In 2018 there were 1,521 investigations into victims of commercial sexual exploitation that resulted in 400 victims being verified (the majority are female). Rates are highest in Broward, Miami-Dade, and Duval counties. The literature shows that the average age of recruiting girls to be bought and sold for sex is 13 years old.

## Girls' Experiences in School

Approximately 27,000 girls in middle and high schools across the state participated in the survey. Girls in Florida reported high rates of enjoying school (89%), and receiving mostly A's or B's in the last school year (81%). School connectedness is important because it is linked to positive self-esteem, sense of purpose, and buffers against psychological distress, substance use, delinquency, and school drop-out.

- *Safety in school:* One in three girls reported she does not feel safe in school. This raises questions about how girls experience and navigate their school environments on a daily basis.
- *Access to a teacher:* While the majority of girls reported they have access to talk to a teacher one-on-one, this was not the experience for one in four girls.
- *Bullying<sup>1</sup>:* Girls experience high rates of bullying. Two in three Florida girls in high school reported being verbally bullied

<sup>1</sup> Verbal bullying defined as: being taunted, teased, experience name-calling, or been excluded or ignored by others in a mean way. Physical bullying defined as: being hit, kicked or shoved, physical harm/injury, or having their money or belongings taken. Cyberbullying defined as: someone sending mean emails, text messages, IM's or posted hurtful information on the Internet.

(63%); one in three have experienced physical bullying (30%); and one in three have experienced cyberbullying (35%). The rates for girls are higher in middle school.

- *Violence with a weapon:* Reports of being threatened or injured with a weapon were generally higher for boys (10%) than for girls (7%). Among Native Hawaiian youth, girls reported higher proportions than boys.

### Girls' Experiences at Home

Living environments and relationships with parents are key indicators for girls as they can either create a sense of safety and support or violate safety. Early exposure to violence during childhood increases the risk for trauma experiences and re-victimization. One in three girls report that their families yell and insult one another.

- *Access to parent:* One in four girls reported that if she had a personal problem she could not ask a parent for help.
- *Removal from home due to child maltreatment:* Between January 2018 and February 2019, 7,581 girls were removed from their homes due to physical abuse, sexual abuse, domestic violence, or parental drug abuse. The removal reasons are comparable by gender with the exception of sexual abuse; 449 girls were removed from home due to sexual abuse as compared to 195 boys.

### Impact of Girls' Experiences on Indicators of Well-being

Compared to boys, girls report less emotional well-being during adolescence.

- *Experience of depression:* More than one in three girls experience depression (38%) compared to one in five boys (18%).
- *Hopelessness:* More than one in three girls express hopelessness (37%) in feeling that "life was not worth it" compared to one in five boys (21%).

- *Sadness:* More than one in two girls (53%) report feeling sad or depressed most days during the past year, as compared to one in three boys (33%).
- *Substance use:* More than half (53%) of Florida girls report not using substances. Of the one in two girls who have used substances in their lifetime, alcohol, vapor products, and marijuana are the most frequently used. Substance use is highest among Native Hawaiian (57%), White (50%) and girls of multiple races (49%). The proportion of girls having used substances is similar in middle and high school. While rates of use are similar to boys, the literature suggests different motivations for girls' drug use (i.e., weight control, depression/anxiety).
- *Suicide ideation and making a plan to attempt suicide:* One in five girls (18%) reports thinking seriously of attempting suicide in the past 12 months prior to taking the survey. Differences by race/ethnicity exist with one in three Native Hawaiian (30%), one in four American Indian/ Native American (26%), one in five Hispanic (19%), one in five White (19%), one in six African American (16%), and one in eight Asian girls (12%). Of critical attention is that the one in three girls who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or "unsure" of her sexual orientation reports the highest rates of suicide ideation and planning, with proportions three times higher than their heterosexual peers.
- *Justice system involvement:* In Florida over 9,000 girls were arrested in 2017-18. The needs of girls who are sent to lock up facilities show unaddressed trauma (e.g., higher proportions of experiences in out-of-home placements, neglect, physical abuse, sexual abuse, trauma, witnessing violence, mental health diagnosis, self-mutilation, suicide ideation, suicide plan, somatic problems) that is greater than that of boys.

What does it all mean? There are cohorts of girls who are at greater risk for trauma, mental health challenges, exploitation, and/or system involvement than their peers. For this reason, we must pay attention and learn more about girls' different experiences so that we can understand what we are doing well and where we are failing them. The data identifies opportunities for intervening and connecting with girls in our communities, which can lead to improving well-being.

### **Emerging Cohorts of Girls that Warrant Attention**

- **Racial/Ethnic Differences:** While all girls report high rates of sadness, hopelessness, and substance use, differences within race/ethnicity show that girls are experiencing their communities differently on indicators of victimization, access to supports, and feelings of safety.
- **Sexual Orientation Differences:** Approximately one in five girls in the survey sample (22%) identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or "unsure" of their sexual identity. There were greater disparities among this group for sexual and physical victimization, suicide ideation, and attempts.
- **Geographical Differences:** One in five girls in the survey sample reported living in a rural community. There were greater disparities among this group in receiving D's and F's, bullying, and access to parents or teachers.
- **Grade Level Differences:** Emerging differences among middle school girls show greater reports of verbal and physical bullying than among their high school peers.
- **Most Vulnerable Girls:** One in ten girls report lack of access to a safe adult (parent or teacher). They experienced greater feelings of sadness, hopelessness, less safety in school, bullying, less safety in neighborhoods, substance use, and school suspensions and/or arrests at younger ages.

A girl's well-being must represent her whole being. Safety is not just about physical safety. Emotional safety is also important. Research indicates that girls who feel safe are also more likely to have more friends, get along better with their caregivers, and have other adult support systems. Feelings of safety impact physical, emotional, and psychological well-being and this all impacts her cognitive development. Safety is critical for educational attainment, advancing in opportunities, experiencing connectedness, and feeling protected if there is a problem (e.g., bullying) or incidents and events that require support. This broader definition of safety provides context for how girls report



bullying and other indicators of trauma, danger, and anxiety. The data shows the day-to-day macro/micro aggressions that girls experience can be related to later negative outcomes and “disconnection” from school, home, community, and/or self. Among the girls who report not feeling safe in school, they experience greater exposure to bullying, experience greater hopelessness, and feel more sadness than their peers who felt safe. Additionally, girls who did not feel safe at school were two times more likely to be suspended than girls who felt safe. Further, for girls experiencing abuse in the home, the school environment may exacerbate or trigger post traumatic stress symptoms.

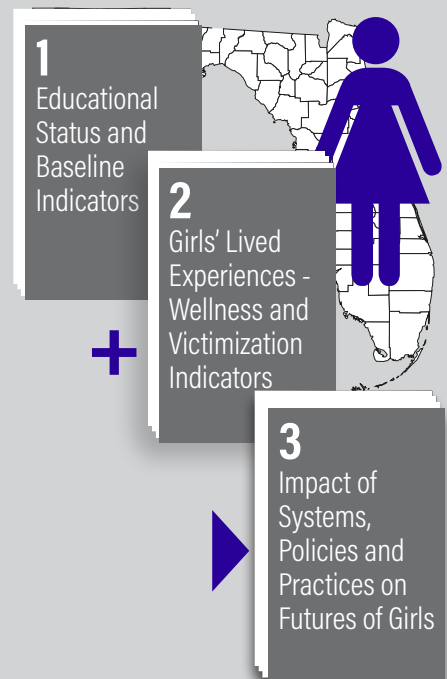
Interventions informed by research can create environments that promote safety and reduce girls’ risks of depression, suicide attempts, anxiety, substance use,

and increased stress in adulthood. Most importantly, *lifting up girls’ experiences sends a message right now to all girls so that no girl should feel alone or invisible, but rather feel safe, valued, and seen.* It should raise alarm that one in three girls across communities in Florida are reporting “life is not worth it.” We must stop losing girls to suicide, drugs, and the justice system. Girls’ futures matter.

There is more to learn from the girls themselves about what we can do as parents, educators, community providers, policymakers, and systems to better support them. When we get it right—create safety nets and connection in community—girls can feel safe in relationships, plan for their futures, and “see their futures.” This is what we hope for all girls: to be able to fully contribute to their families, their community and society.

### Status of Girls Series

The next publication in the series will include robust recommendations designed to address policies and practices that perpetuate trauma and disparate educational and well-being outcomes for girls in Florida. These recommendations will be informed by the research of the first two publications as well as the voices of girls. Listening sessions with girls will be conducted to better understand access to services and supports as well as their insights and recommendations for how policymakers, educators, providers, parents, advocates can better support them.



Visit [www.seethegirl.org](http://www.seethegirl.org) for the full report. To receive a copy, contact Blythe Zayets, Director of Development at [bzayets@seethegirl.org](mailto:bzayets@seethegirl.org).