

A VOICES FROM THE FIELD REPORT

BLUEPRINT FOR INVESTING IN GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN

SEPTEMBER 2015

THE NEW YORK
WOMEN'S
FOUNDATION®

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THE VOICES FROM THE FIELD SERIES

The New York Women's Foundation's ***Voices from the Field*** series is comprised of four Blueprint for Investing in Women reports that explore the position, needs, and strategies for supporting the security and contributions of low-income NYC women during one of four major developmental periods (i.e., ages 0-8, 9-24, 25-59, and 60+). The series is based on a "Voices from the Field" approach that draws on data obtained from academic and policy research and from interviews with a cross-section of on-the-ground leaders – including members of each age cohorts. Its goals are to: (1) broaden understanding of the key role and issues of NYC's low-income girls and women; (2) stimulate broad, productive discussion of how best to support those roles and address those issues; and (3) catalyze bold investment into promising strategies and solutions.

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THE NEW YORK WOMEN'S FOUNDATION

**BLUEPRINT
FOR INVESTING
IN GIRLS AND
YOUNG WOMEN**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

SEPTEMBER 2015

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THE “BLUEPRINT FOR INVESTING IN WOMEN” SERIES

The New York Women’s Foundation’s *Blueprint for Investing in Women* series comprises of four reports that explore the position, strengths, needs, and best strategies for promoting the economic security of NYC women, across the full span of their lifetimes. In line with NYWF’s core mission, the series particularly focuses on the situations of women whose opportunities for progress are limited by outside factors or attitudes related to initial economic position, race, immigration status, or sexual orientation/gender identity.

The goals of the series are to: (1) broaden understanding of the roles and issues of the city’s low-income girls and women; (2) stimulate broad, productive discussion of how best to both support those roles and address those issues; and (3) catalyze bold investment by all stakeholders capable of expanding relevant opportunities and resources.

Each of the four *Blueprints* covers a major developmental period in a woman’s life:

- **0 – 8:** the years of most intense and rapid physical, cognitive, social and emotional development.
- **9 – 24:** the generally prime years for acquiring core knowledge, competencies, and good habits.
- **25 – 59:** the generally most intense years of paid employment, career building, asset acquisition, and raising and supporting families.
- **60+:** the diversely productive and contributing years of older adulthood.²

The *Blueprint* series is based on a “Voices from the Field” approach. That is, it draws on qualitative and quantitative data obtained both from the best academic and policy research and from a cross-section of on-the-ground leaders – including members of each age cohort and their supporters. Each *Blueprint* includes:

- An overview of the size, scope, and overall demographics of the girls and women in the particular age cohort being considered.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The *Blueprint for Investing in Girls and Young Women* is based on the input of the leading experts in the field of youth development, health, foster care, juvenile justice, and education. More than a hundred and twenty advocates, philanthropists, scholars, service providers, and government officials – key staff members of the NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH), Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD), Department of Education (DOE), the Administration for Children’s Services (ACS) and the NYS Office of Family and Children’s Services (OFCS); leaders of several major funding and advocacy institutions; and staff and girls across schools, health clinics, and youth-serving organizations in every corner of the city – generously shared their knowledge, experience, and insights. Their guidance was invaluable to this report and is deeply appreciated.

Strong thanks are also due to the staff of NYWF – who offered exceptional collective and individual guidance on early report outlines, presentations, and drafts; and whose ongoing work in support of the city’s low-income girls and young women continues to be groundbreaking and inspiring.

There is clearly still much to be done in support of the current and future economic security, safety, health, and contributions of our city’s girls and young women. But there also exists a robust and diverse cadre of organizations, funders, policy-makers and individuals channeling their best energies and thinking towards reaching those goals. The approaches of these far-seeing providers and activists are proven; their achievements are impressive; their methods offer clear guidance for expansion and replication. It is up to us, as a society, to better recognize, reinforce, and build on their efforts and vision.

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I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“I’ve been taking care of my little sister for forever, and it is hard work, believe me. It’s being a role model, making decisions, setting priorities, saying what the limits are, and getting things done for someone else. It’s time to think of caregiving as leadership training.”

– Participant in a focus group of black teen girls³

According to the 2010 census, New York City is home to approximately 800,000 girls and young women, ages 9-24.⁴ Nearly 75% in that group are girls of color (black, Asian or Latina). Nearly 40% are immigrants or the daughters of immigrants.⁵ And a significant segment lives in absolute or near poverty.⁶

The simple math tells us that low-income young women and girls comprise less than 10% of NYC’s total population. But that raw statistic gives little indication of the outsized importance of this group. Enter any low-income immigrant community or community of color, and you will see girls shouldering huge responsibilities from a very early age with minimal acknowledgement and minimal support. Barely into their teen years, they are minding younger siblings and manage major household chores. In mid-adolescence, they are taking on low-paid after-school jobs to supplement household incomes. As soon as they master English, they are serving as translators, interpreters and advocates for older relatives. And – barely out of their adolescence – many are raising children of their own.

Low-income girls from communities of color and immigrant communities shoulder huge responsibilities from a very early age – generally with minimal acknowledgement or support.

THE POTENTIAL, THE CHALLENGES, AND THE OUTCOMES

Experts in the field of youth development agree that the decade and a half between nine and 24 is a coherent and pivotal period in a young woman’s development. That – while the beginning and end-points of that trajectory may be worlds apart – certain traits persist across the full time span. And that those traits are eminently well suited to the tasks of mastering knowledge, building skills and acquiring healthy habits.

In particular, the experts note that throughout these years of maturation girls naturally possess huge stores of mental, physical and creative energies, coupled with a willingness to channel those energies into structured academic, artistic, and athletic pursuits. They care deeply about social issues and want to make a difference in the world. They are open to new ideas and also brimming with ideas of their own. And, while still deeply attached to their primary caregivers, they are eager to build relationships with others and to move towards greater independence.

³ Taken from: Institute for Women’s Policy Research. *Black Girls in New York City: Untold Strength and Resilience*. Black Women for Black Girls Giving Circle. Washington D.C. 2009

⁴ See Citizens Committee for Children New York: <http://data.cccnewyork.org/data/map/98/child-population#10/16/1/16/14/a>

⁵ See: *ibid*: <http://data.cccnewyork.org/data/map/98/child-population#11/17/2/18/14/a>

⁶ See: *ibid*: <http://data.cccnewyork.org/data/map/96/child-poverty#9/11/1/14/14/a>.

At the same time, however, the experts caution that girls' ability to parlay their innate assets into long-term health, stability, and economic security depends upon whether they are supported by certain key resources, opportunities and protections. In particular, by:

- Committed, caring adults who validate their sense of self-worth and their aspirations.
- Solid housing, good nutrition, and viable venues for exercise.
- Safety from violence and abuse – and help maintaining autonomy over their own bodies.
- Appropriate academic preparation and coaching.
- The chance to explore and hone diverse talents and competencies.
- Assistance gaining entrée to viable higher educational, vocational, and employment paths.



TURNING POINT FOR WOMEN AND FAMILIES

And, the experts invariably conclude, our society generally and tragically fails to provide low-income NYC girls with that critical foundation of supports. Instead, it leaves most of those girls to contend with a range of acute, poverty- and bias-related challenges, threats, and deprivations:

- Caregivers too overworked, over-stressed, and under-supported to provide consistent reinforcement.
- Pervasive messages denigrating their gender, race, ethnicity, roles and abilities.

- Deteriorated housing conditions; high levels of pollution; limited access to good nutrition; and poorly-maintained, unsafe parks and recreational facilities.
- Ubiquitous violence, bullying, sexual pressures – and outright sexual assault.
- An infrastructure of public services – schools, youth development programs, child welfare services, employment training programs – that were rarely crafted with their specific situations in mind; and that continue to pay little strategic attention to their particular challenges, preferences, and strengths.

The experts aver that – up to a point – the hurdles, resource deficits and responsibilities provide the white heat in which this group's internal resiliencies are forged. That low-income immigrant girls and girls of color tend to become highly

self-reliant at a very young age. That they capably manage multiple tasks, navigate diverse cultural and linguistic realities, and bridge the distance between family constraints and the demands of the broader world.

Inevitably, however, the stressors and shortfalls also take deep tolls. Girls who begin their lives in deep poverty are rarely enabled to climb out of that poverty. Those who begin their lives in danger and deprivation are rarely enabled to build lives of solid emotional and physical health.

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A few key statistics illuminate these tragically missed opportunities and sobering results:

- **More than 40% of NYC’s black and Latina girls – and comparable percentages of girls from several new immigrant communities – are denied the care and reinforcement they need to finish high school.**⁷ Across the board, those girls’ graduation rates are higher than those of their male counterparts – and also higher than they were ten years ago. Nonetheless, the figures remain appalling. What is more, in too many cases, high school graduation is as far as those girls get. Most receive little guidance towards accessing college, high-quality vocational training, or promising career tracks. And – absent those crucial advantages – most are left to take whatever low-wage, non-secure jobs they can find. And our society is left without the advantage of their fully-developed talents, skills, and leadership abilities.



TURNING POINT FOR WOMEN AND FAMILIES

- **Low-income teenage girls across all racial and ethnic backgrounds have stunningly poor rates of nutrition and fitness, high rates of asthma and obesity, and high rates of depression.** NYC’s young Latinas have the highest rates of suicide attempt of any group of teens; fully one in seven tries to take her own life.⁸ And – notwithstanding recent progress in the area of reproductive

choice – each year, as many as 10% of Latina and black teens still become pregnant; and several thousand take on the relentless responsibilities of motherhood at a point at which they, themselves, may still need considerable nurturing.⁹

- **Several thousand girls a year – almost all girls of color – are pushed into the City’s foster care and juvenile justice systems or into the commercial sex trafficking industry** by ruthless sexual exploitation sustained from earliest childhood. And – once within those grim domains – only the strongest and luckiest truly exit or fully heal. A significant number of the adult women who cycle between the streets and the City’s shelter, psychiatric, and criminal justice systems were once members of this cohort of girls.¹⁰

More than 40% of NYC’s low-income black and Latina girls – and roughly comparable percentages of girls from several new immigrant

communities – are denied the care and reinforcement they need to finish high school. And even those who manage to graduate are rarely guided into viable college, vocational training, or career tracks. Absent those critical advantages, those girls are left to take whatever low-wage, non-secure jobs they can find. And our economy is denied the advantage of their fully-developed talents, skills, and leadership abilities.

⁷ See Table 1, in Appendix D, taken from Kemple, James J.; *The Condition of New York City High Schools: Examining Trends and Looking Towards the Future*; Research Alliance for New York City Schools; NYU Steinhardt; March, 2013; http://steinhardt.nyu.edu/research_alliance/publications/condition_of_nyc_hs; and Shih, Howard and Peiyi Xu; The State of Asian American Children; Asian American Federation; NYC, 2014.

⁸ 2013 CDC Youth High Risk Behavior Survey: <http://www.cdc.gov/Features/YRBS/>

⁹ These statistics are calculated based on Table PO10. Live Births and Pregnancy Rates/Teens Age 15 – 16 of the *Summary of Vital Statistics 2012; City of New York; Appendix A: Supplemental Population, Mortality and Pregnancy Outcome Tables*, Bureau of Vital Statistics, released by NYCDOHMH in January 2014

¹⁰ Hines, Elizabeth G. and Hochman, Joan. *Sex Trafficking of Minors in New York: Increasing Prevention and Collective Action*. New York Women’s Foundation: 2012 ; http://nywf.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/NYWF_Sex-Trafficking-of-Minors.pdf

RESPONSES TO DATE

A core group of institutions – a few public schools, a handful of after-school efforts, a small range of health-care service providers – offer programs specifically designed to develop the assets and address the challenges of New York’s diverse low-income girls and young women. And – overwhelmingly – the participants lucky enough to be served by those programs seize the opportunities they are given and run with them. They improve academically. They enter and complete college at measurably higher rates than their unsupported peers. They create and lead projects of strong benefit to themselves and their communities. They evolve into accomplished artists and athletes. They exercise greater reproductive choice and if they do bear children in their teen years – they manage those children’s needs with greater confidence and skill. They move from trauma to healing, from homelessness to housing stability, from suicide attempt to emotional stability. They build more viable employment paths.

But these strategically-deployed and impressively-successful programs remain *absolutely the exception*. For the most part, policy-makers, providers and funders across the public, nonprofit and philanthropic sectors continue to presume that this population is “doing okay,” fail to notice when it isn’t, and fail to commit themselves to rectifying the situation.

For the most part, policy-makers, providers and funders across the public, nonprofit and philanthropic sectors continue to presume that low-income girls and young women are “doing okay,” fail to notice when they aren’t, and fail to commit themselves to rectifying the situation.

In low-income areas, public schools tend to care more about boosting girls’ test scores than about protecting their safety, reinforcing their diverse strengths and talents, or guiding them into appropriate higher education or vocational programs. Few publicly-supported youth development providers focus specifically on promoting girls’ leadership skills and interests. Fewer still strategically address the barriers that can limit their progress. The foster care system has not historically offered robust, gender-specific guidance and support to the adults who take responsibility for girls while they are in that system; is rarely able to provide robust and necessary developmental support to girls placed in individual foster homes; and cannot typically ensure viable housing options for girls leaving the system.

And, finally, most of the City’s workforce development programs are ill-equipped to serve out-of-school/out-of-work youth in general – and young out-of-school/out-of-work women, in particular.

Basically, in short – in the words of one leading advocate – girls of color and immigrant girls remain “a footnote” on the public agenda.

CONCLUSION

THE CALL TO ACTION: THE BLUEPRINT FOR INVESTING IN LOW- INCOME GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN

For nearly thirty years, The New York Women’s Foundation has pursued a multi-front agenda of highlighting the critical roles of NYC’s low-income women and girls, fighting for the policies and garnering the funding required to promote their progress, and collaborating with the grass-roots organizations that best understand and support their needs.

The Blueprint that follows was crafted using the same approach as The Foundation’s core thought-leadership and grant-making work. It is grounded in a review of the available data and literature and in interviews with top academics, government officials, nonprofit and foundation directors, teachers, youth workers – and with the girls and young women who are ultimately the most authentic experts on their own lives.

It is clear that it will take ongoing partnership with this full array of stakeholders to ensure that every New York girl can grow up in health, safety and economic security. This Blueprint is offered as a first step towards galvanizing the coordinated attention, discussion and commitment towards achieving the necessary broad-based change.

The Blueprint’s sector-by-sector recommendations include:

NON-PROFIT: Sector-by-Sector Recommendations for Action

- Train staff and leadership in all organizations serving youth around the particular needs, strengths and situations of diverse groups of low-income girls.
- When formulating programs for girls, seek guidance from seasoned and successful providers of girl-focused services, and – even more importantly – from the girls themselves.
- For providers supporting women’s employment – focus more strategically and proactively on the particular needs of out-of-school, out-of-work (OSOW) young women, ages 16-24.

PUBLIC: Sector-by-Sector Recommendations for Action

CONTINUE IMPROVING OVERALL CONDITIONS IN LOW-INCOME COMMUNITIES, THROUGH:

- Ongoing and expanded enforcement of housing code standards.
- Ongoing and expanded enforcement of environmental protections and standards.
- Robust expansion of access to nutritious food and safe and well-equipped recreational facilities.
- Development of strategic, community-informed and -guided violence prevention efforts.

TAILOR DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION (DOE) APPROACHES TO MORE SPECIFICALLY SUPPORT GIRLS' CHALLENGES, STRENGTHS, AND LONG-RANGE PROSPECTS OF ACADEMIC AND ECONOMIC SUCCESS BY:

- More rigorously enforcing the Title IX legislation that was put in place to protect girls from bullying, violence, and sexual assault; and adopting restorative justice practices that incorporate student perspectives into shaping rules and consequences – and robustly support students' developmental and behavioral needs.
- Directing professional development towards helping teachers to better: (1) support diverse learning styles and levels of academic preparation; (2) provide vibrant and diverse opportunities for girls' leadership; (3) frame learning experiences within projects that strongly incorporate individual inquiry, teamwork, and concrete, real-world applications; (4) address behaviors that reflect intense personal challenges.
- Creating or reinstating high-quality arts, sports and community service programming through both internal curriculum expansion and strategic partnerships.

- Expanding the cadre of school-based guidance counselors – and increasing training and support for those counselors.
- Expanding and tailoring school-based efforts (e.g., the new career and technical assistance programs (CTEs)) in ways that will provide girls with strong entrée into promising “non-traditional” (and well-paid) employment tracks.

TAILOR DEPARTMENT OF YOUTH AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT (DYCD) APPROACHES TO MORE PROACTIVELY SUPPORT GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN BY:

- Building the ability of staff members from contracting organizations to: (1) take into account the particular interests, strengths, and needs of diverse, low-income girls; (2) proactively include girls in key leadership and program-planning roles; and (3) promote gender respect and equity in all program activities.
- Increasing investment into high-quality programming for high-school-age students; and better addressing the factors (e.g., responsibility for minding younger siblings or for earning money; parental concerns about the hours or location of programming) that can impede teenage girls' participation in that programming.
- Increasing investment in the Summer Youth Employment (SYEP), the Out of School Youth (OSY) and the Young Adult Internship (YAIP) programs– with a strong emphasis on linking girls to living-wage jobs and industries.

MAINTAIN AND FURTHER STRENGTHEN THE YOUTH- AND GIRL-FOCUSED PROGRAMS OF THE DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND MENTAL HYGIENE (DOHMH), BY:

- Continuing to expand school-based clinical and mental health services and reproductive health services.
- Continuing to expand and strengthening school-based – and general public – campaigns against cigarette smoking and substance abuse.
- Working with Latina-serving organizations to create suicide prevention programs for the girls of that community, and expanding collaboration with the Administration for Children’s Services (ACS) to strengthen developmentally-focused mental health supports for girls in the foster care and Close-to-Home (CTH) systems.
- Expanding school-based sexual education programs and working with ACS and DYCD to provide better options and supports to girls whose situations put them at particularly high risk of coerced, unwanted, or premature pregnancy and parenting.
- Expanding the *Nurse-Family Partnership* program that provides information, coaching, linkages, and hands-on role modeling for young, first-time mothers.

STRENGTHEN THE CAPACITIES OF ADMINISTRATION FOR CHILDREN’S SERVICES (ACS) TO SUPPORT GIRLS IN FOSTER CARE AND CLOSE-TO-HOME (CTH) PROGRAMS, BY:

- Providing in-depth, gender-specific training and supports for the staff members, foster parents, and biological parents who have a role in caring for girls who have experienced ruthless abuse, deprivation and violence.
- Increasing the access of girls who are placed in individual foster homes to youth development services that can promote healing; provide a

sense of community; and reinforce academic, creative, athletic, self-defense, and independent living skills.

- Giving renewed consideration to the ways in which programmatically rich, well-staffed, community-based, community-supported group care might be the most promising and viable option for an expanded segment of the teenage girls in the foster care system.
- Working with the City, housing providers, and youth development organizations to expand the supply of well-designed and comprehensively-supportive affordable housing for the girls who exit those systems.

IMPROVE THE CAPACITIES OF THE DEPARTMENT OF SMALL BUSINESS SERVICES (SBS), THE HUMAN RESOURCES ADMINISTRATION (HRA), THE NASCENT OFFICE OF WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT, AND INDIVIDUAL WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS TO BETTER SERVE THE NEEDS OF OUT-OF-SCHOOL/ OUT-OF-WORK (OSOW) YOUNG WOMEN, BY:

- Promoting system-wide understanding of the particular needs (e.g., training, child care, leadership development) and potential situations (e.g., homelessness, trauma, sexual exploitation and violence) of this population.
- Ensuring that linkages between SBS and Community Partners include providers with the specific commitment and capacity to support those needs and situations.
- Creating similar collaborations between Community Partners and HRA – and continuing to expand the definition and flexibility of the activities mandated for cash assistance recipients.
- Sharing information about and connections to “decent-wage” jobs across all relevant City agencies and expanding City support for employers willing to work with this population.

PHILANTHROPIC: Sector-by-Sector Recommendations for Action

- Spearhead a broad-based, unflagging campaign bringing together policy-makers, heads of key City agencies, heads of major and community-based nonprofits – and diverse low-income girls and young women – to create more appropriate policies and programs for this population.
- Underwrite the development and dissemination of position papers and evaluations of promising approaches, the creation of forums, and the establishment and promulgation of guidelines and training materials for relevant providers.
- Seek out and support effective individual nonprofit programs, and – also – partnerships promoting better service delivery.
- Fund advocacy organizations working to create and expand public policies and programs benefiting diverse groups of low-income girls and young women.

RECAP OF BLUEPRINT TAKEAWAYS

- Girls and young women represent a critically-important group within low-income immigrant communities and communities of color.** From their very earliest years, those girls provide essential caregiving, advocacy and wage-earning assistance to their families; and – as they grow up – they almost inevitably evolve into the principal (or sole) family providers and support systems in those communities.
- A combination of pernicious, intersecting factors – poverty, racial/ethnic prejudice, gender bias and societal neglect – place enormous barriers in this population’s way.** Low-income New York girls grapple with pervasively denigrating messages and poor environmental conditions. They face strong threats of violence, ubiquitous sexual pressures, and – all too often – outright sexual assault. And they negotiate a service infrastructure that was never crafted to address their particular situations, needs, or potential. While most manage to survive, few achieve truly robust long-term health, safety or economic security; and many enter adult lives of chronic homelessness, exploitation, and abuse.
- A determined but highly circumscribed group of providers are serving this population with impressive success.** By listening to low-income girls’ and young women’s own voices, tailoring services to meet their specific needs, and tapping their powerful innate ambitions and strengths, these providers are boosting academic performance, reinforcing leadership skills, measurably increasing health, supporting strategic choice, and positioning this population for better long-range educational and employment opportunities. They offer an invaluable, proven set of best practices to build on. But they remain the absolute exception – and the numbers that they reach remain tightly circumscribed.
- Investing boldly and strategically into supporting low-income girls and young women offers the unparalleled opportunity to produce game-changing results.** Besides increasing the overall quality of life for those girls, it will expand the skilled labor force that our economy so desperately needs; tap huge new wellsprings of enterprise, creativity, and leadership; and improve overall odds for the children that those girls will eventually raise – often singlehandedly. It will help shrink the homeless shelter and public assistance systems that are the last resort for so many sexually traumatized and educationally deprived girls, once they reach adulthood. And it is the most promising route for finally reducing the generation-spanning, citywide 20% poverty rate that is rooted in decades of indifference to this critical group of New Yorkers.

II. THE LAY OF THE LAND: Demographics and Situations

“You couldn’t invent a more diverse group of girls than we serve in our programs. Dozens of languages, dozens of cultures, every possible family constellation and situation. And yet, at core, they all share the same needs. To be safe. To explore their considerable talents. To receive the recognition they deserve. To channel their energies into something they can feel good about.”

– Program Director in a Queens-based youth development organization

NUMBERS AND OVERALL GENDER DISTRIBUTION¹¹

There are an estimated 800,000 girls and young women, age 10-24 in New York City – a total comprising roughly 8% of the city’s full official population. The number of girls in the 10-14 year-old cohort is slightly lower than it is for the corresponding cohort of boys. After the age of 14, however, the gender discrepancy begins to reverse in all groups except Latinos – with the largest discrepancy being found among the 20-24 year-olds.

There has never been a definitive race-by-race analysis of the sources of this shifting gender balance. It is probably different for each group. Within the cohort of black youth, however, the causes almost certainly include the stark and tragically disproportionate number of boys and young men who are lost to the city due to incarceration or death by violence.¹²

RACE/ETHNICITY AND PLACE OF ORIGIN

NYC has perhaps the most diverse youth population in the world.

An estimated 36% of the girls in this group are Latina; 24% are black; 25% are white; and 12% are Asian – with the Asian group growing at the fastest rate. There are also a growing number of girls from the Mid-East – though it is unclear exactly where this population shows up within the overall statistics.

Besides the diversity reflected by these broad demographic categories, there is also substantial heterogeneity *within* each group. The families of the Latina girls – once largely Puerto Rican and Dominican – now include new immigrants from every country of Latin America. The families of the black girls – once predominantly descended from American slaves – now also include recent arrivals from every country of the West Indies and Africa. The immigrant families of New York’s Asian and Mid-Eastern girls represent dozens of different nations, ethnicities, languages, and religions.

¹¹ Except where specifically noted, the information in this and the next few sections are based on the 2010 Census; on the NYC DOHMH’s *Summary of Vital Statistics 2012; City of New York; Appendix A: Supplemental Population, Mortality and Pregnancy Outcome Tables*; and on the Citizens’ Committee for New York City Children’s Keeping Track of New York City’s Children, 2013 and 2014. Because these sources do not generally include undocumented New Yorkers, the “official” totals may be significantly lower than the “actual” totals. And because certain ethnic/racial groups (e.g., Arab Americans, Native Americans) are not separately tracked – and also do not easily fit into the four main standard categories of “Asian, black, Latina and white” – some potentially important demographic nuances are probably being obscured.

¹² See Table 1, Appendix D.

Even the families of the city’s white girls are more diverse than they have been since the turn of the century – bolstered by successive recent waves of new immigration from across Eastern and Southeastern Europe.¹³

The scope and impact of New York’s immigration trends cannot be overstated. Nearly 38% of all New Yorkers are foreign-born, so the experts estimate that there are at least that many girls either coming here as immigrants themselves or living with one or more foreign-born parent; a full 16% live in what are commonly known as “linguistically-isolated” homes – i.e., homes in which no one over the age of 14 is fluent in English.¹⁴

And – while this city’s ability to attract new immigrants is one of its greatest strengths – for the girls who arrive with (or are born to) new immigrant families, the issues can be substantial. They are – as noted in a previous section – almost inevitably obliged to serve as primary translators, advocates, and interpreters for older relatives, while still obediently submitting to the rules of those older relatives. They are forced to negotiate the chasms between their home culture and the dominant culture into which they have been thrust. And they are also forced to negotiate the differences between their cultures and the cultures of the other immigrant groups with whom they tend to share turf.

The upshot of all this diversity is clear. Any policy – any program – that serves New York’s girls has to be cognizant both of the amazing cultural riches

and of the potentially challenging situations that those girls bring to the mix.

SELF-IDENTIFIED SEXUAL ORIENTATION¹⁵

The 2013 New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH) annual “EpiQuery Survey” of self-reported findings about NYC’s young people reveals that among Asian and white girls, ages 14-18, the percent identifying as LBO (Lesbian, Bi-sexual, or Queer/Questioning) is roughly proportional to the overall national average – respectively 9% and 11%. Among black and Latina

girls, however, the percent identifying as LBO is more than double what might be expected – respectively 21% and 22%. (N.B.: the EpiQuery Survey had not yet begun tracking self-reported Trans-gender youth in 2013).

No expert consulted could offer an airtight explanation for these numbers, though a couple suggested that they may simply be a reflection of black and Latina girls’ greater willingness to be honest

about their developmentally-normal desires, curiosities, and experimentations.

Whatever the explanation – just as is true when considering what is needed for an ethnically- and racially-diverse population – any program that serves NYC’s girls has to be informed by an appropriate awareness and respect for the strengths and challenges that can come with different sexual orientations and gender identities.



FIGURE SKATING IN HARLEM

¹³ 2010 Census.

¹⁴ Citizens’ Committee for Children of New York, *Keeping Track of New York City’s Children: 2013* and discussions with leaders in the field.

¹⁵ Epiquery: https://a816-healthpsi.nyc.gov/SASStoredProcess/guest?_PROGRAM=%2FEpiQuery%2Fyrbs%2Fyrbsindex

ECONOMIC STATUS

The census shows that a solid 31% of all girls under the age of 18 live in households in which annual incomes are at or below the Federal Poverty Line. For Asian girls, the percentage living in poverty-level households is slightly lower than the 31% citywide youth average (though leaders in the Asian community stress that the poverty level can be acute for certain segments of this highly diverse population).¹⁶ For black girls, the overall poverty rate is roughly on par with the citywide average. And for Latina girls, the overall poverty rate is a staggering 40%.

What is more – stark as those numbers may be – they do not fully reflect the gravity of these girls' economic situations. The Federal Poverty Line is a seriously deficient measuring stick for people living in one of the most expensive cities in the country. If one uses the slightly higher – and considerably more accurate – “NYC Poverty Line,” the percentage of girls living in relative or absolute indigence increases dramatically, across the board.

And so, once again, it must be stressed that no program serving this population can afford to ignore the impact that deprivation can have on young people – or fail to take action to address that impact.

LIVING ARRANGEMENTS

The living arrangements of NYC's girls, ages 9-18, can vary greatly. Some live with both parents – or with one or both parents plus grandparents or other adult relatives. An estimated 47% live with just one adult – generally a single mother.¹⁷ For

one in ten, the principal caregiver is a grandparent – generally a single grandmother.¹⁸

While each of these diverse household structures has different strengths and raises different issues, they all – at least potentially – provide the girls who live in them with a minimum of one adult to count on as they move towards greater maturity and independence.

There is, however, a second significant group of NYC girls who possess no such critical foundation of support. Girls who are in foster care, girls who are forced into the commercial sex industry, and “runaway” girls – girls in the juvenile justice system – are all essentially left to negotiate the challenges of maturation from a seriously-flawed, uncertain, shifting, or nonexistent caregiving base.¹⁹

There has never been a definitive tally of how many girls and young women fall into each category of this latter unmoored and vulnerable group; and – what is more – the various categories are not mutually exclusive. There is no way, therefore, to arrive at a strictly unduplicated count. But even the imprecise, fluid, currently available estimates offer a grim picture of the living situations of a substantial segment of the city's young female population.

In particular:

- **An estimated 2,000 girls, ages 9-18, are in the child welfare system,** due to parental abuse, neglect or abandonment. Most of these girls cycle through several foster or group homes by the time they reach the age of 18. Many go missing for long periods. Almost all graduate

¹⁶ See, particularly, Shih, Howard and Peiyi Xu. *The State of Asian American Children*. Asian American Federation. NYC 2014

¹⁷ Citizens' Committee for Children of New York, op. cit.

¹⁸ Calculated based on the following assumptions: 100,000 NYC children, ages 0-18, being raised by grandparents [2010 Census]; roughly 50% of those children are girls [ibid]; 50% are between the ages of 10-18 [ibid].

¹⁹ It must be noted that some girls in foster care are placed with relatives rather than with non-kin foster parents. For those girls, the sense of family connection and overall level of security is clearly stronger. Similarly, some girls in the sex industry start out while still living with their families – though the level of parental attention and support they receive from those families is clearly inadequate to the need.

out of the system with no solid, stable living arrangement in place.²⁰

- **An estimated 2,000-4,000 girls and young women, ages 11-24 are what is commonly labeled as “trafficked” or are otherwise involved in the commercial sex exploitation industry.**

Few in this group live in a permanent or safe setting. Some live with their pimps – often with other girls in the same situation.²¹

- **As many as 10,000 girls and young women, ages 14-24, are homeless – many living on the streets** under the same fluid and unsafe conditions as (and indubitably overlapping with) the group of girls identified as being in the coerced commercial sex industry.²²

- **111 girls and young women, ages 14-24, are in the juvenile justice system²³** – with 34 living in the residences provided through the City’s new Non-Secure Placement (Close-to-Home (CTH)) program.²⁴ Like the girls in foster care, few in this system exit to secure and predictable living quarters.

While most girls who live with the stresses of poverty need at least some strategic external support, girls who fall within these four categories also need assistance of a more fundamental nature – i.e., basic nurturing and care, help healing deep traumatic wounds, a solid place to call home. And so, once again, any program in which low-income girls participate needs to be acutely sensitive to the diversity of family circumstances that those girls may bring to the table, and – particularly – to the needs and challenges of those who have the most fragile (or totally non-existent) family ties.

²⁰ Estimated based on ACS statistics, *Flash*, July 2015 (http://www.nyc.gov/html/acs/downloads/pdf/statistics/Flash_July_2015.pdf), supplemented by discussions with experts in this field.

²¹ Hines, Elizabeth G. and Hochman, Joan. *Sex Trafficking of Minors in New York: Increasing Prevention and Collective Action*. New York Women’s Foundation: 2012 (http://nywf.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/NYWF_Sex-Trafficking-of-Minors.pdf)

²² Safe Horizon website: <http://staging.safehorizon.org/page/streetwork-homeless-youth-facts-69.html>

²³ Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS) stats, 2013; http://ocfs.ny.gov/main/reports/Youth_In_Care_Report.pdf

²⁴ ACS *Flash* statistics, op.cit.

III. THE STARTING LINE: Assets and Potential

“We learned about outer space!” “We learned about the DNA of a strawberry!” “We tested the waters of the Hudson!” “We learned about pollution!” “We cleaned up a garden!” “We planted flowers!” “We learned how to manage garbage!” “We had such fun – science is such fun!” “Science is SO MUCH MORE THAN FUN – it’s about doing things that help!”
– Fifth grade girls, commenting on the benefits of the **Committee on Hispanic Children and Families’ “Sci-Girls” program at P.S./M.S. 278, in the Bronx**

The providers consulted for this report consistently commented that low-income girls of color and immigrant girls tend to possess acquired strengths extending far beyond those of either their male counterparts or their more affluent female (generally white) peers.

They repeatedly noted the sturdy self-reliance, the deep sense of enterprise, and the deep sense of responsibility demonstrated by those girls. They highlighted the fact that – from a very young age – they routinely provide childcare for younger siblings; contribute concretely to family income; translate, interpret and advocate for older family members; and confront the demands of a complicated school system with generally limited parental guidance.

And the girls themselves provided ample confirmation of those adult observations. In an **Institute for Women’s Policy** report on black teenage girls from across NYC’s low-income communities, for example, the girls surveyed overwhelmingly reported that they felt capable of: “standing up for themselves” and “taking care of themselves.”²⁵

Similarly, in a national survey conducted by the **Girl Scouts**, it was black and Latina girls who most reliably reported that they were eager to: “challenge themselves by trying new things,” “think about what they learn,” “initiate projects and activities,” and “come up with solutions and then work for their implementation.” And it was Latina and Asian girls who most consistently affirmed that they felt adept at: “learning about other people’s views,” and “building common ground.”²⁶

“My mother has five other kids from five men, and my father got seven kids besides me,” asserts one of the girls individually interviewed for the Women’s Institute report. “I got tired of waiting for things, so I was just like, ‘Forget it, I’m going to make my own money so I don’t have to wait for nobody.’ ... My level of maturity [came] in [when]... I realized that.”

²⁵ Institute for Women’s Policy Research. **Black Girls in NYC: Untold Strength and Resilience.** Black Women for Black Girls Giving Circle. Washington D.C. 2009

²⁶ Girl Scouts. **The Resilience Factor: A Key to Leadership in African American and Hispanic Girls.** Girl Scout Research Institute. NYC;2011

Besides self-reliance, the qualities that the experts most consistently noted in this population included: deep curiosity about scientific and technological matters, extraordinary leadership capacities, and a fierce desire to promote positive social change.

A second **Girl Scouts'** report, for example, stressed the enthusiasm with which low-income black and Latina girls take on such STEM-related tasks as: "understanding how things work and are built," or "creating new models of things," or "figuring out puzzles and problems." And it averred that those girls invariably frame that enthusiasm in terms of "finding ways to make the world a better place."²⁷

Likewise, providers across every ethnic group unfailingly note the ability of girls of color and immigrant girls to lead community service projects. They state: "Girls rise to the top of every service project we launch; they are way ahead of the boys." Or: "It is girls who really 'get it' that there are things in our society that need to be changed – and who want to make sure it happens." Or: "Girls are natural

leaders – a force for change." Or: "If you give girls the chance to take charge of a service effort they will do it – and they will do it really well."

Rachel Lloyd, Founder and Executive Director of **GEMS** – an organization that helps young women who have been forced into the exploitative commercial sex industry – explains the phenomenon as follows:

"When a girl's voice has been silenced or generally ignored by society at large – when she feels that she has only limited opportunities to control her life – she will develop a huge hunger to speak out and to act. Give her a way to help herself – and others – and she will grab it."

Whatever the reason, this is clearly a group of New Yorkers who – with just a bit of direction and support – are capable of achieving great things for themselves, for their communities, and for the city as a whole.

The Strongest Leaders You Could Ever Find

"The girls that we serve are some of the most vulnerable and angry in the city," recounts the leader of one of the City's Close-to-Home (CTH) non-secure juvenile justice facilities. "They are also some of the strongest leaders you could ever find. We were really worried about this one young woman. She never showed regret for anything she did – and she did plenty, I can tell you; she would periodically set off fire alarms just so she could go AWOL. We almost gave up on her. And then, one day, we took her to help clean up some homes that had been damaged by Hurricane Sandy. She stopped cold when she saw that damage; she burst into tears. I had never seen her cry, despite all that she'd been through, herself. She pitched into that clean-up effort as if her life depended on it – she ended by leading the whole thing. And now she keeps asking for other opportunities to help. It was as if this was what she had been waiting for all her life – the chance to make a difference."

²⁷ Girl Scouts. *Generation STEM: What Girls Say about Science, Technology, Engineering and Math*. Girl Scout Research Institute. NYC: 2012.

IV. THE HURDLES: Challenges and Tolls

“Low-income girls of color are told to be quiet – instead of being asked what they think. They are made to do things for which they shouldn’t be responsible – like taking care of their siblings after school. They are deprived of what they should get every day – like breakfast. They are taught to submit to boys and men – when they should be helped to stand up to them. They are taught to compete against one another – when they should be shown how to support one another. These girls are really strong and they have such valuable ideas! If we could only give them what they need, just imagine how amazing they could be!”

– Lower East Side Middle School Math Teacher

While New York City’s low-income immigrant girls and young women of color clearly manage major responsibilities and possess impressive potential, the threats and dearth of resources that surround them cannot help but take their toll. In the absence of strategic interventions, the steady stream of risks and deprivations can wrest achievement from their hands; steal their health; lessen their autonomy; and – in the worst cases – push hard-won self-reliance to the point of exhaustion, bitterness, and reflexive violence.

Based on what the experts describe, the challenges facing these girls can be categorized into three main groups:

- Undermining messages.
- Pernicious environmental conditions.
- Limited, constraining, or dangerous family circumstances.

Each of these categories is multi-faceted. Each is shaped by a set of intersecting factors related to: (1) racial, ethnic, and gender bias; and (2) profound family and community poverty.

Each will be examined in detail, below.

UNDERMINING MESSAGES

NYC’s low-income girls contend with a steady flow of undermining messages regarding appropriate behavior and roles. They sustain frequent denigration of their gender, their races, and their backgrounds. They face a barrage of affronts that – if not effectively countered – can sap the strength of all but the most robust and determined, pit one girl against the other, and seriously compromise safety and security. Sometimes the messages come from the broader society – and sometimes from within their own cultures or families. Whatever the source, they are both broadly pervasive and deeply detrimental.

MESSAGES ABOUT BEHAVIOR

While such dynamic, proactive, national and international role models as Sonia Sotomayor, Malala Yousafzai, and Leymah Gbowee provide vibrant evidence of the growing clout of immigrant women and women of color, the inspiration that those leaders offer can seem very far away from the vantage point of a South Bronx street. For what low-income girls of color and immigrant girls most frequently hear on their own home turf is: “Be dependent, self-sacrificing, submissive, humble, and empty of desire for autonomy and mobility.”²⁸

²⁸ Gil, Rosa Maria and Vazquez, Carmen Inoa. *The Maria Paradox: How Latinas Can Merge Old World Traditions with New World Self-Esteem*. Scenery Press. Bloomington, Indiana. 2002.

“Women are really strong – hey, it’s the female lion who’s the hunter,” asserts a 15-year-old participant in the Sadie Nash Leadership Project. “But we’re not supposed to show it. We’re supposed to be ‘ladies’ – which basically means keeping quiet and doing what we’re told. We’re powerful, make no mistake; but, like, it’s a threat to men – or to the people in charge or something – if we seem too powerful.”

Programmed Not to Make Waves

“In this neighborhood,” explains the principal of a South Bronx K-8 school, “the students who do the best – the ones who achieve the best test scores, the best graduation rates – tend to be the girls. But, before we start congratulating ourselves, let’s consider the reasons behind that success. When it comes to kids of color, our school system primarily prizes docility and good test scores. It doesn’t support the kids who are ambitious or boisterous – or loud, or creative. In fact, it often punishes them. And so – since girls are more likely to be programmed to ‘not make waves’ – that’s whom the school system tends to reward. But developing the skill of filling in standardized test boxes hardly equips a girl for college – or for a good job. More often than not, it leads to dead-end work with low pay. If you want to be cynical, you could say that this is all that we think those girls are capable of achieving. If you want to be really cynical, you could say that it is all that we want them to achieve.”

As was cited above – and as will be further explored in subsequent sections – girls of color and immigrant girls of all backgrounds leap at the chance to speak up about the issues that most matter to them and to exert leadership in projects that inspire them. But, within their own schools and homes, those girls are, more often than not, not only discouraged from speaking out and taking forthright action – they are often actively reprimanded for doing so.

MESSAGES ABOUT APPROPRIATE ROLES I: CAREGIVING

Almost all girls from low-income communities grow up watching their mothers, grandmothers, older sisters, and aunts serve as unpaid (or underpaid) and under-valued caregivers for family members and outside employers. And those girls, themselves, are often expected to put aside their own aspirations, needs, interests, and schedules to provide care and attention to younger siblings, older family members – or to their own babies, should they give birth.

Providers across the board note that the girls with whom they work frequently miss school, forgo after-school opportunities, scale back college plans, and even leave school altogether in order to meet caregiving expectations – while their brothers and boyfriends essentially go scot-free.

“Society puts us women in boxes, and those boxes are mostly about taking care of other people,” remarks a 14-year-old focus group participant. “Taking care of kids – yours and everyone else’s – that’s, like, considered the most ‘female’ thing of all.”

They Would Never Ask That of Her Brother

“If a South Asian girl wants to apply to an out-of-town college rather than to one at which she can continue to live at home, her parents will ask her: ‘But who will take care of your little sisters if you’re not here to do it?’” notes the Education Director of a major youth-focused provider for that community. “And that will be that – she’ll apply to a CUNY college. They would never ask that of her brother. And if – by chance – they did ask that brother, he would answer: ‘I dunno.’ And that would be that – and he’d apply to whatever college he chooses.”

MESSAGES ABOUT ROLES II: SERVING OTHER PEOPLE’S SEXUAL NEEDS

Girls in all communities – but particularly in low-income communities – contend with an onslaught of destructive and contradictory messages regarding female sexuality. On the one hand, the entertainment and media industries continually crank out images of women as sexual objects – heavily made-up, scantily dressed, and strictly proportioned. On the other, religious institutions regularly point out the dangers of women’s desirability – and preach the need to monitor, regulate, and punish any show of that desirability. And, all the while, on the streets, in school corridors, and even in their own homes, those girls experience a steady stream of sexually-loaded comments, innuendoes, pressures, threats, and – all too often – attacks.



LOVE HEALS

“Everywhere we look, all we see are pictures of super-sexy models. And so we spend all our energies trying to get to that super-sexy, supermodel look,” remarks one fourteen-year-old focus group participant at Sadie Nash Leadership Project. “We are constantly worried about how we appear – whether we are pretty enough, thin enough, curvy enough. Now, there’s nothing wrong with wanting to look your best – dressing up, wearing make-up, whatever. And there would be nothing wrong with a man doing it too. But most men, you know, they just don’t waste their time.”

If not strongly countered, this flood of ugly signals and experiences can produce outcomes that range from obsessive over-attention to personal attractiveness, to destructive girl-against-girl competitiveness for male attention, to feelings of self-contempt – and contempt for other women. At worst, it can lead to girls’ belief that sexual assault is normal, that it is their own fault if it happens, that *there is nothing they can do about it*.

“One of the top issues for the girls who come to us for health services is childhood sexual abuse,” explains Dr. Angela Diaz, Director, Mount Sinai Adolescent Health Center – the city’s premier health care provider for low-income teenagers and young adults. “More than 25% of our female patients have experienced sexual abuse. And it’s not just those who come in for sexual and reproductive health care; it’s also the ones who come in for dental care – or for an eye exam. Our staff members have all been trained to ask directly about sexual abuse, regardless of presenting symptoms. And all too often, when they do, they hear the same story. A father, an

uncle, a brother, a teacher, a boyfriend, a stranger – sometimes even another female – someone has molested that girl, often over time. And what is perhaps most upsetting of all, is that – until we come along with our careful, caring inquiries – most of those girls have never breathed a word of what they’ve been through to anyone else. They haven’t asked for help. They’ve accepted that sexual abuse is just something they have to endure; they essentially face the devastating impact of that abuse in solitude.”

MESSAGES ABOUT RACE/ BACKGROUND AND SEXUAL ORIENTATION/GENDER IDENTITY

RACE AND BACKGROUND

Girls from communities of color and from immigrant communities inevitably face not only limiting, disrespectful and destructive messages regarding their gender and sexuality, they also contend with prejudice and bullying related to race, ethnicity, and beliefs. And – as with the gender-based messages – those prejudices almost inevitably become internalized, twisted, and used to hurt the female peers who should be their closest allies.

The experts emphasize that – regardless of whether it is black girls berating one another for their skin color or hair texture or Muslim girls taunting one another for compliance with religious practice – the worst part of the damage wreaked by outside bigotry is the ways in which it distorts those girls’ own inner perspectives and pits girls against one another.

“Girls in the Muslim community endure huge amounts of intolerance from other groups,” explains a youth worker from an organization serving that community. “It has gotten worse since 9/11, but it has always been there. It often

centers on their hijabs, but – of course – that’s just shorthand for a lot of other stuff. And while the bullying may start outside the community, it quickly evolves into internal attacks. The girls who choose not to wear hijabs are taunted by their peers for being insufficiently modest; the ones who do wear them are taunted for caving in to ‘outdated’ cultural pressures. They jeer at one another for being old-fashioned – and then turn around to fiercely ‘snitch’ on each other for even talking with boys. Which – in our community – can have devastating repercussions, like getting a girl sent back to her parents’ hometown to be married off.”

GENDER IDENTITY AND SEXUAL ORIENTATION

There is good evidence of a recent, steady and welcome evolution in the way that gender-non-conforming black and Latina girls are viewed and treated

by their peers. The DOHMH statistics, quoted in a previous section and documenting the extent to which Latina and black girls are willing to self-identify as lesbian, bi-sexual, or questioning/queer – testify to that evolution. And teachers, foster care providers – and girls themselves – provide further corroboration of those data. They remark that it is generally no longer a “big deal” for most black and Latino youth when girls openly

fall in love with one another or when they embrace non-conforming gender identities.

Providers also report that a concerted, several-year-long effort to raise the consciousness and change the behaviors of adult staff members in key service systems (particularly in the fields of foster care and juvenile justice) is making a concrete and much-needed difference in the attitudes and actions of those adults – and in the overall service system environment.



LOVE HEALS

Improvement, however, is not the same as eradication of millennia-deep anti-LGBTQ biases. And so, across the board, providers and girls note that the bullying still does go on, at times, and – more importantly – that even a single malicious incident can produce lasting, destructive psychological after-effects for a developing girl. The on-the-ground experts also stress that support and reinforcement specifically tailored for gender-non-conforming girls remains extremely scarce; that society as a whole and “main-stream” youth development programs in particular rarely support the specific needs and perspectives of this group; and that LGBTQ organizations rarely focus primarily on girls – let alone girls of color.

“For young black and brown women who are LGBTQ, there are multiple issues,” explains Erica Cardwell, Assistant Director for Arts and Culture at the Hetrick-Martin Institute, one of the City’s premier service organizations for LGBTQ youth. “They have no positive images and no safe spaces. The world, in general, provides rare opportunities for any positive reinforcement. And even the LGBTQ world is dominated by the ‘G!’”

The experts also note the persistent and even more challenging lack of progress on what is probably the most critical front – i.e., the attitudes of the families of so many gender-non-conforming girls. LGBTQ youth are kicked out of – or abused within – their homes, at alarming rates. They constitute a seriously disproportionate share of the City’s foster care and juvenile justice systems, of its population of young runaways, and of minors who are commercially sexually exploited.

Safe Horizon – one of the primary providers of services to NYC’s runaway youth – recently released statistics, for example, that indicate that as many as 40% of all homeless youth identify as LGBTQ.

The **Hetrick-Martin Institute’s** Harvey Milk School – the city’s only LGBTQ-centered public school – provides breakfast, lunch, and dinner for all its

students as well as showers and couches on which to sleep, because those students are often unwelcome within their own homes.

“A lot of students at Hetrick-Martin Institute may not have a family they can count on,” states Cardwell, cited above. “They may have no support system. They are hungry – for food, for care, for affirmation. For those students, we are their family.”

ENVIRONMENTAL CONDITIONS

Besides wrestling with the fallout of undermining messaging, girls in low-income communities are also typically undermined by the concretely unhealthy or unsafe conditions in their neighborhoods: the poorly-maintained housing, the omnipresent pollutants, the near-universal lack of access to basic nutritional and fitness resources, and – perhaps worst of all – the inescapable violence.

CRUMBLING HOUSING AND INDUSTRIAL WASTE

The housing stock in low-income neighborhoods – both the privately-owned and the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA)-managed – is often crumbling or dilapidated to the point of releasing ongoing streams of dust and toxins into the lungs of community residents. And, in addition, the City’s main sites of industrial waste production, dumping, and treatment are invariably located in poor communities – further contributing to the overall level of toxic pollution in those areas.²⁹

Besides providing the young people of those neighborhoods with constant, indisputable evidence of society’s indifference to their wellbeing, the pervasive deterioration and contamination contributes to rates of asthma that are significantly higher than those of any other group of youth in the city.³⁰

²⁹ See Citizens’ Committee for Children of New York, *Keeping Track of New York City’s Children: 2013*. New York. 2013

³⁰ See Table 3, Appendix D taken from NYC DOHMH statistics for 2011. For a good discussion of the impact of urban pollution on rates of asthma, see the NRDC Website.

LIMITED ACCESS TO GOOD NUTRITION

The main food options in low-income areas generally comprise fast food restaurants; supermarkets offering over-priced, poor quality produce; and bodegas selling little more than canned and packaged food, cold cuts, cigarettes, beer, and Lottery tickets. The resultant rates of poor nutrition and of weight problems are stunning. Nearly 19% of both black and Latina girls are overweight and – respectively – an additional 11% and 12% of those girls are obese.³¹

Both the current and the previous City Administrations have supported a select few programs – e.g., **Healthy Bodega** and **Green Carts** – to counter this reality. Similarly, the New York State Hunger Prevention and Nutritional Assistance Program (HPNAP) now provides limited support for farmers markets, community farms, and healthy-cooking seminars across many of the city’s low-income communities. These efforts, however, are far from adequate to the need; and they have yet to make a game-changing difference in the overall ability of low-income families to access and purchase truly nutritious food on a regular basis.

“Far too many NYC children face hunger and food insecurity – which has a devastating impact on their health and well-being,” asserts Jennifer March, the Executive Director of the Citizens’ Committee for Children of New York. “We know that in communities in parts of the Bronx, for example, many families not only face challenges affording fresh fruits and vegetables, but in finding markets near their homes in which they

can purchase healthy foods. When families don’t have access to these basic resources, children suffer. We see it in the high obesity rates; and we also know that poor nutrition can lead to challenges in school performance and to short- and long-term health consequences.”

LIMITED ACCESS TO APPROPRIATE RECREATIONAL FACILITIES

Some of the lowest rates of “open space per child” can be found within the poorest neighborhoods in the city. Bedford Stuyvesant and Brownsville in Central Brooklyn – Mott Haven and University Heights in the South Bronx – are all at the bottom of the list. What is more, whatever green spaces and playgrounds do exist in low-income neighborhoods are generally uninviting, unsafe, and run down.³²



GIRL BE HEARD

Mayor Bill de Blasio’s recently-announced “Community Parks Initiative” – a groundbreaking \$130 million investment into general capital improvements plus \$36.3 million of investment into “green infrastructure” within the parks of 35 low-income areas – represents a major and deeply-welcome turnaround in the City’s “green

space” priorities. But the promised improvements will inevitably remain long in execution, and in the meantime the youth of those areas continue wrestling with the impact (e.g., obesity, poor fitness, poor overall health) of decades of disinvestment into their neighborhoods’ outdoor recreational facilities.³³

INESCAPABLE VIOLENCE

The last and probably greatest environmental threat to low-income girls and young women of color is the violence that surrounds them.

³¹ See Table 3 in Appendix D, *op cit*.

³² Citizens’ Committee for Children of New York, *op. cit*.

³³ Office of the Mayor News. *De Blasio Administration Launches Community Parks Initiative to Build More Inclusive and Equitable Park System*. NYC October 7, 2014.

How Can We Be Anything But Violent?

“How can we be anything but violent?” asks a black girl interviewed for the Women’s Policy Institute study quoted previously. “Our neighborhoods aren’t safe. Grown men talk to us in bad ways. People jump us. I don’t ever feel comfortable – it’s scary out there. Give us some safety and we’ll be less violent ourselves.”

Whether gunfire across public housing projects, men following them in grocery stores, fist fights in school yards, or invasive frisking at public school entrances, violence and the detritus of violence constitute the inescapable life backdrop for these girls. It destroys their peace of mind, puts them at constant risk of harm, and increasingly drives them into reflexive, self-defensive aggression of their own.

“Girls growing up in the City’s housing projects are often taught to fight by their mothers,” explains the director of a girl-focused youth development project. “It’s generational; it’s normative – it’s a matter of survival.”

Experts across the board assert that – in the face of continual threats, abuse, and indifference – girls in this position have begun bucking societal expectations of “docility” in ways that are unlikely to be viewed as helpful or constructive. Foster care workers, teachers, and correctional system staff consistently note that low-income girls of color are increasingly prone to take violent revenge against abusive sexual partners, to attack one another, and to lash out against those in authority. And that those self-defending reactions, in turn, have unleashed a wave of swiftly reflexive institutional punishments.

Thus on the one hand, DOHMH’s 2014 EpiQuery Self-Assessment Survey reveals that, in 2011, a full 30% of black girls and 27% of Latina girls age 14-18 reported that they had “engaged in a physical fight”

at some point during the previous calendar year. And on the other, that girls of color are increasingly being suspended from school or placed in Close-to-Home (CTH) juvenile justice facilities for reasons related to their rage-fueled aggressiveness.³⁴

The situation, in short, is spiraling seriously out of control. We have failed to create institutional environments and protections that help girls of color feel genuinely safe, heard, and supported. Instead, we are creating the same incipient “school-to-jail” pipeline for them that we have put in place for their brothers.

FAMILY CIRCUMSTANCES AND ATTITUDES

For many low-income NYC girls, the risks and deprivations that try their strengths do not end once they step inside their own homes. The experts emphasize that most low-income families deeply love their daughters and make huge sacrifices to help ensure their futures. They nonetheless also point out that parents in a sizable number of those families are not able to provide their daughters with essential resources, that they are ill-equipped to protect them from harm, and that they may actually contribute to that harm.

LACK OF SURVIVAL ASSETS

In many impoverished households, parents and guardians do not earn enough to provide their daughters with even the most basic necessities

³⁴ Girls of color are suspended at fully ten times the rate of their white counterparts and constitute virtually 100% of the female youth population currently serving time in secure or non-secure settings. See: Columbia University, Center for Internationality and Social Policy Studies and African American Policy Forum, *Black Girls Matter: Pushed Out, Overpoliced and Underprotected*, NYC, 2015.

(sound housing, sufficient food, appropriate clothing) – a situation that makes it next to impossible for those girls to focus on much beyond simple survival.

“It is not just opportunity that shrinks with poverty – it is vision,” remarks Joanne Smith, the Founder and Executive Director of Girls for Gender Equity (GGE). **“When you live within a framework of resource scarcity, your options, your access – your world – literally shrinks.”**

OVERWHELMING WORK SCHEDULES

In many low-income households, parents’ work schedules are too demanding to permit them to engage in their daughters’ lives in a meaningful and consistent way – or even to offer those daughters adequate protection from the dangers that surround them. As several providers note, how can a single mother, working as a home health aide or nail salon worker, possibly attend her daughter’s school play or go to a parent-teacher conference when missing a half-day of work means losing her job? How can a housekeeper whose employer calls at the last minute to say: “I’ve been unavoidably detained – give my kids dinner and stay there til I get there,” get home in time to give her own children their evening meal?

“My neighbor sells drugs and stuff,” asserts one of the girls interviewed for the *Women’s Policy Institute* report, cited above. **“And my grandmother – like – she works, so she’s not there; and my mother’s not there and sometimes my stepfather’s not there and so nobody’s home but me and my little brother. So any time I hear [those dealers] arguin’ or somethin’ my brother and me we just go in the closet; and we just hide and talk and play games; and we push all the boxes up and everything, and we just cover ourselves with a sheet.”**

EDUCATIONAL BARRIERS

Language and educational limitations often constrain caregivers’ ability to provide girls with much-needed academic reinforcement, guidance, and coaching. The experts who work with low-income girls and their families note that – as much as the older members of those families may want to help their daughters succeed in school – they can do only so much. They may never have gotten beyond sixth grade, themselves. They may not speak English. They may be intimidated by the very idea of talking to their daughters’ teachers.

In a full 28% of the families in the Asian/Pacific Islander community, for example, no one over the age of 14 speaks or reads English well. The girls in those – and many other – immigrant households are, thus, essentially left entirely on their own to decipher the demands of the new world into which they have been thrust.³⁵

INAPPROPRIATE DEMANDS AND ROLE REVERSALS

As noted in previous sections, girls in low-income households almost invariably assume onerous child-caring, income-producing, and advocacy responsibilities from a very early age. They are asked to meet a whole range of family needs at a point when they themselves still need considerable support, encouragement, and opportunity. And they are, thereby, not only deprived of the chance to freely pursue their own goals, they are forced to wrestle with stressful parent-child role reversals.

“Girls in our community,” observes the program director of one immigrant youth organization, **“live with huge, conflicting pressures. On the one hand, they are expected to honor tight curfews and to conform to all their parents’ strict rules. And, on the other, they are continually called upon to translate, interpret, and advocate for those parents. It can be really hard for a girl**

³⁵ Shih, Howard and Peiyi Xu. *The State of Asian American Children*. Asian American Federation. NYC 2014.

to keep obeying people who – in one part of her mind – ‘can’t take care of themselves.’ It can lead to an endless cycle of rebellion and strife.”

OVERLY-NARROW DEFINITIONS OF SUCCESS

Parents’ personal or cultural perceptions of what constitutes “success” may hinder their daughters’ ability to explore vital interests, honing potentially significant gifts, or considering a whole range of career possibilities.

The reasons for the blinders vary. In some families, it is the constant tolls of poverty that most drastically limit the perception of what success could look like.

“For Latina mothers who live with crushing poverty and constant stress,” explains the director of an economic development program that serves that community, “it becomes a major achievement if their daughters simply grow up without dying.”

In other families, it is the result of parents’ own lack of exposure to varied career possibilities – or of their belief that the huge sacrifices made to come

to the New World will be “wasted” if children do not excel in very narrowly-defined terms.

“Chinese-American families don’t generally ask: ‘is my twelve-year-old healthy?’ They don’t think: ‘maybe it would be nice for her to play volleyball or learn to play the cello.’ They just ask: ‘is she doing enough school work?’” notes the leader of an after-school program serving that community. “There is a huge emphasis on very traditional – and very limited – measures of success. There is no concern for whether the girl is happy, well-rounded or flexible enough to ‘make it’ in a constantly evolving world”

The leaders concur: denying girls the chance to explore diverse interests and skills in a society in which nimbleness, enterprise, creativity, and boldness are essential is – in some ways – tantamount to limiting them to failure. That though the reasons for the parental strictures may vary, the outcomes are similar in terms of curbed ambition, lost talent, and – in many cases – squandered opportunity.

No One Even Considers the Other Possibilities

“In our community, cultural beliefs about what constitutes ‘success’ tend to narrow college and career options down to a binary choice for girls,” explains the Program Director of a major youth organization serving the South Asian community. “It is either: ‘become a doctor,’ or: ‘stay home and help us.’ No one even considers the other possibilities. No one notices that what their daughter really excels at is writing – that she might become a great journalist or playwright. No – the moment that she gets that first ‘C’ in math, they begin calculating how much better it would be for the family if she dropped out of school altogether, took full care of her siblings so her mother could work longer hours, and brought in some extra money by working at the local Duane Reade at night.”

PARENTAL GENDER PREFERENCE AND DISCRIMINATION

The experts note that – besides parents' gender-skewed expectations regarding caregiving responsibilities – parents (particularly mothers) often treat sons and daughters very differently in terms of overall discipline, affection, expectations, emotional support, and willingness to encourage independent thinking and action.

A number of leaders in the foster care field noted that mothers tend to downplay and forgive sons' abuse or misbehavior – but “hold on to the rage they feel for their daughters forever.” That they visit their sons in group homes with regularity – and often try very hard to get them back – but rarely do the same for their daughters.

And a number of leaders in the immigrant community noted that mothers tend to expect more from their daughters than they do from their sons, that they blame girls more for their faults than they do boys, and that they are less inclined to grant girls the freedom to define their own lives.

“In the Asian community, a mother’s ambitions for her daughter can be two-edged,” states the founder of a pioneering Asian girls’ theater group. “Mothers tell their daughters: ‘Do better than I did!’ And then they add: ‘But do it exactly the way I did it!’ They wouldn’t dare put such conditions on their advice to their sons. They assume that boys have the right to be pioneers – to figure things out for themselves.”

It’s My Turn Now!

“Sure, most mothers want their girls to have better lives than they did,” explains a Bronx-based high school science teacher. “But if a low-income Mom gave birth to her daughter when she was really young herself – if her own desires and achievements were totally aborted by that birth – she may, on some level, resent that daughter, or expect the daughter to somehow make up for all that. She may feel: ‘I coped, even though I was denied all these things – why do you need more than I got?’ Or she may feel: ‘I had nothing because of you; it’s my turn now!’ And so, consciously or unconsciously, she may oppose her daughter’s efforts to seize opportunities that could take her away from the task of ‘mothering’ the Mom back. Somehow, it doesn’t seem to happen that way with sons. There’s less antagonism, less competition, and less of an expectation of ‘payback.’”

SERIOUS, UNADDRESSED FAMILY ISSUES

In many low-income families, acute stress, mental illness and related substance abuse issues often go unacknowledged, denied, untreated or under-treated because of stigma, shame, ignorance, or lack of resources. In those families, there is a high likelihood that a daughter will be neglected, that she will witness violence and abuse, or that she will be subjected to direct emotional, physical and sexual abuse, herself.

And that the daughter, in turn, will demonstrate related or consequent mental health issues of her own.

These are the girls and young women whose strengths tend to be most ruthlessly undermined, whose level of trust is generally lowest, whose own issues most often remain unaddressed. Like gender-non-conforming girls (who also, as noted previously, tend to experience high levels of familial rejection and abuse) these are the girls who are most likely to be forced into the City's foster care system, the juvenile justice system, and the commercially-exploitative sex industry – and the ones who, as



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of long-term sexual abuse, and of having lived in foster homes.³⁷

adults, are most likely to end up cycling between shelters, jails, psychiatric facilities and the streets.

A grim 40% of the girls who age out of foster care are estimated to eventually land in the City's shelter system.³⁶ And, conversely, a solid majority of the women in the homeless shelter systems have had family or personal histories of mental illness,

They've Never Had Enough

"The thing about the young women whom we serve," explains the director of a Close-to-Home (CTH) non-secure juvenile justice facility, "is that no one has ever given them as much as the time of day. Most have been ruthlessly sexualized since they were tiny. Probably 99% have serious mental health issues. Some have never sat down to a family meal; most have no idea where Yankee Stadium is – even those who grew up in the Bronx. In this facility, we provide them with good food, with adequate clothing, with a bed to sleep in, and with a roof over their heads. But they nonetheless constantly hoard and steal from us and from one another. We just can't seem to get them to the place where they feel secure. And the truth is that they've never had enough – and they know that once they leave this place, they will have precious little to count on, once again. How do you persuade girls who face that reality that they can depend on you?"

³⁶ Safe Horizon statistics.

³⁷ Leicher, Susan; *Community Action Plan to Prevent Homelessness: Promoting Stability and Improving Options*; New York: United Way of New York City, 2005.

WE CANNOT AFFORD TO BE SIDETRACKED: The Intersectionality of Gender with Racism and Poverty

In recent years, advocates for girls have begun examining how the intersecting forces of poverty, racism, and gender bias combine to undermine the circumstances of low-income girls of color. Those advocates' preliminary observations regarding the particular role of gender are presented below, organized within the three main "categories of challenge" – i.e., **societal messages, environmental conditions, and family circumstances and attitudes** – utilized in this report.

The experts agree that overt and covert **societal messages** regarding low expectations of success probably fall equally on boys and girls of color. But, they remark, only girls wrestle with the additional message that their most appropriate role in life is providing under-compensated, unrecognized, and poorly-respected care for everyone else. And it is primarily (though not exclusively) girls who endure the widespread expectation that they were placed on earth to serve other people's sexual needs. And, finally, it is basically only girls who contend with strong censure regarding behavior deemed "insufficiently modest" – and with strong condemnation should they choose to end a pregnancy resulting from lack of access to knowledge or protection, or from outright coercion.

In terms of sheer numbers, boys of color clearly contend with the most ruthless societal preconceptions regarding "potential criminality."

They are the ones most often stopped and frisked, suspended or expelled from school, and incarcerated. Nonetheless, as noted in previous sections, societal views regarding appropriate female behavior – combined with broad-based preconceptions about race – are expanding the risk of strong and swift punishment for girls of color who dare to show aggression, rebellion, or self-protecting violence.

In terms of **environmental conditions**, low-income male and female youth clearly suffer equally from infrastructure deterioration and pollution, and from poor nutritional and recreational resources. In fact – the experts report – low-income boys of color tend to have higher rates of asthma and obesity than do girls.³⁸

In addition, while the pervasive violence in low-income communities probably affects boys and girls equally in terms of psychological costs — and while girls endure significantly more sexual violence than boys – boys are definitely more likely to experience the mortal consequences of bullets, blows, and knives. The leading cause of death for 15-24 year-old males across all communities is: "assault and homicide." For girls it is: "malignancies."³⁹ Latino males age 15-24 die at four times the rate of females in that group. Black youth in that age group die at *eight times* the rate of their female counterparts.⁴⁰

³⁸ See Table 3, Appendix D.

³⁹ Taken from Table 6 (*Deaths and Death Rates per 1,000 Population by Age, Ethnic Group, and Sex, NYC 2012* and Table 7: *Leading Causes of Death in Specialized Age Groups, Overall and by Sex; Summary of Vital Statistics 2012; City of New York; Appendix A: Supplemental Population, Mortality and Pregnancy Outcome Tables*; Bureau of Vital Statistics, NYCDOHMH; January 2014

⁴⁰ Taken from Table 7: *Leading Causes of Death in Specialized Age Groups, Overall and by Sex; Summary of Vital Statistics 2012; City of New York; Appendix A: Supplemental Population, Mortality and Pregnancy Outcome Tables*; Bureau of Vital Statistics, NYCDOHMH; January 2014

In the area of **family circumstances and attitudes**, the experts remark that boys and girls living in poverty clearly endure the same potential deprivations in terms of housing, food, clothing, or other basic resources. They face potentially similar neglect from parents working around the clock – and similar absence of academic support from parents with limited educations or English language skills. They are equally likely to be expected to contribute to family income, and – in immigrant households – to serve as translators, intermediaries and advocates. And they are both at risk for parental rejection and abuse for gender-non-conforming behavior. In fact, the experts aver, boys often endure harsher parental reactions to that behavior than do girls.

On the other hand, the experts stress, boys are generally free from the kinds of caregiving and other household duties that so often interfere with girls' ability to seize outside opportunities. Boys generally enjoy more encouragement, affection, and forgiveness from the mothers who – so often – represent the main regularly-present figures in low-income families. And boys are much less likely to be sexually abused within their own homes.

It must be noted that – in all these discussions of “intersectionality” – the experts' intent is not to: “divide and conquer” or to: “see who is doing worse.” They note that the factors of

racial and ethnic prejudice and poverty are cumulative and inter-related – that they “add up to more than the sum of the parts” for *both* genders.

Nonetheless, the experts emphasize, there has been a consistent lack of analytic focus on the aspects of challenge that relate directly to gender. And this lack of focus has measurably reduced the chances that girls' particular issues will come to the forefront – or that they will be addressed with the degree of investment and attention required to make a difference.

“This is not a competitive exercise,” asserts a speaker in a December 2014 conference on ‘Listening to Girls of Color,’ held at Philanthropy New York. “It is a matter of figuring out how to improve the lot of all young people of color in the most effective and informed manner. And a vital part of that analysis is reversing the long history of total inattention to girls' particular needs. Whenever someone says: ‘let's think about girls of color,’ haven't you noticed that someone else almost immediately asks: ‘but what about the young men?’ We cannot afford to keep being sidetracked in this matter. We need to mount an un-deflected call to action for girls – to deliberately and strategically identify and correct all the separate and intertwined factors that have stood in the way of girls' progress.”

V. THE FRAMEWORK FOR ACTION: Challenges and Tolls

“I’m one of the lucky ones. I live in Queens, but I go to this great public school in Washington Heights with arts classes and college trips and great guidance counselors and people coming to talk to us all the time about different jobs. There are no schools as good as mine near where I live, so for other girls in my neighborhood, things aren’t always so great. Maybe their parents never heard of my school. Or maybe they can’t do all the traveling I do because they have to take care of their little brothers and sisters. Why can’t there be schools like mine in every neighborhood? Don’t they care about us?”

– 16-year-old in a focus group conducted at the social action-focused youth development organization, **The Brotherhood/Sister Sol**

Low income girls and young women from New York City’s communities of color and immigrant communities clearly need policies and programs tailored to address their specific preferences, strengths, challenges, and circumstances. And – as will be detailed in later sections of this report – a select set of agencies and providers are committed to providing that tailored support.

Nonetheless, leaders in the field stress, hundreds of years of almost total social indifference to the situations of immigrant girls and girls of color has resulted in the perpetuation of a service infrastructure that generally falls considerably short of that mark.

The sections below provide brief analyses of the main service delivery systems that interact with NYC’s lower-income girls and young women, i.e.: (1) the Department of Education (DOE), which has oversight over the City’s public schools; (2) the Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD), which has oversight over its main youth-focused recreational and employment services; (3) the divisions of the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH) that provide programs for this particular age group; (4) the

Administration for Children’s Services (ACS), which oversees provision of child welfare services and of the Close to Home (CTH) program for young offenders who are deemed to not need “full security” measures; and (5) the range of publicly-supported workforce development and economic security programs that reach the city’s population of out-of-school/out-of-work (OSOW) 16-24 year-olds.

The analyses do not, in any way, purport to be comprehensive evaluations of service delivery or performance in any of these areas. Rather, they comprise synopses of the assessments that the experts offered regarding those systems’ track records, commitment, and ability to appropriately reach and support the girls and young women of chief interest to this report.

DOE: THE PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM

No person consulted for this report was willing to offer a comprehensive analysis of the largest school system in the nation – a system that contains 1,800 schools; employs tens of thousands of teachers; serves more than a million students speaking more

than 160 languages; contends, on a daily basis, with a vast array of academic, social and emotional challenges; and deploys a multiplicity of approaches to address those challenges.

On the other hand, most of those experts were eager to discuss the extent to which the City's school system proactively and effectively recognizes and supports the specific strengths, needs, and potential of low-income immigrant and non-white girls.

And – across the board – what those experts said was that it does not.

In particular, while stressing that many exceptional teachers – and a few entire schools – focus strongly on promoting low-income girls' long-term success and well-being, the experts consistently noted the lack of attention to providing girls with: (1) oases of genuine protection and justice; (2) instruction effectively addressing diverse learning styles, talents, and past academic histories; (3) project-based learning experiences requiring robust critical thinking, team work, and real-life results; (4) regular, vista-opening activities in the areas of fitness/athletics, community service, and the arts; and (5) effective assistance accessing appropriate higher education, appropriate vocational training, and viable potential career options.

The main comments offered in each of these areas are summarized in the sections below.

OASES OF PROTECTION AND JUSTICE

The experts concur: most public schools serving low-income girls do not offer effective protection from bullying, sexual assault, or general violence.

On the contrary – as noted in a previous section – the methods that those schools employ to “contain” that violence only tends to reinforce girls' sense that no one is looking out for their best interests or considering their situations in a fair and caring manner.



GIRL BE HEARD

Officially, Title IX of the 1972 Education Amendments prohibits sexual harassment and sexual violence in any school that receives federal financial assistance of any sort – i.e., in virtually every public school in the U.S. In particular, according to this law, every school must possess and distribute a policy against sex discrimination and sexual harassment, have identified a Title IX coordinator on staff, and make known the procedures it employs for students to file complaints related to those areas.

Nonetheless, when a task force organized by **Girls for Gender Equity (GGE)**, investigated 200 public schools across several major low-income New York City neighborhoods, it found that officials in only ten of those schools could provide the name of their Title IX coordinators.

And **GGE's** “Participatory Action Research” project – which measured the impact of sexual harassment on almost 1,200 youth in 90 NYC schools and CBOs – revealed that 71% of surveyed NYC public school students observed sexual teasing in their school, 65% specifically cited the harassment of LGBT youth, 31% observed “pressure for sex or sexual activity,” and just under 10% noted forced sexual activity in their respective schools.

Perhaps most disturbing of all – the students surveyed through that project stated that they were completely unaware that there was anything that they could do to

address these ongoing assaults to dignity, safety, and sexual autonomy.⁴¹

The sense of danger pervading so many halls and classrooms is further illuminated through a 2014 NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH) survey of citywide public school students, in which fully 12% of Latina and 9% of black girls reported that they had missed school within the previous 30 days because they “felt unsafe” in those schools.⁴²

Fully 12% of Latina and 9% of black girls report that they “missed school within the prior 30 days” because they “felt unsafe” in those schools.

Finally, as previously noted – instead of addressing the environmental and personal factors that contribute to aggression – most schools tend to resort to tactics that add to girls’ sense of fear and abandonment. They post police in school lobbies. They institute policies of “zero tolerance” for aggression – and summarily suspend any girl who responds to the violence around her with her own self-defending violence.⁴³ They fail to offer effective supportive services to girls wrestling with pain and rage.

A few pioneering City high schools are using what is called “restorative justice” strategies to promote a more genuine sense of safety and fairness. In particular, those schools are:

- Removing metal detectors and reducing the number of School Safety Agents.
- Providing training and support enabling teachers to better diffuse difficult situations and to deal with their own natural responses to verbal violence or physical confrontations.

- Instituting rules and behavioral consequences that are transparent, consistent, and based on the input of the entire community, including – particularly – the students themselves.
- Providing supportive services for students whose behavior indicates the need for strategic reinforcement and guidance.

The initial results of those schools’ efforts have been outstandingly promising – both for male and female students.⁴⁴ *And yet, they remain the practice of only a very small handful of schools.* Clearly, this is an area in which further strategic attention could make a major difference.

We Have Some Good Ideas, You Know

“Schools make you feel bad in all sorts of ways,” remarks one 15-year-old participant in a focus group held at the **The Brotherhood/Sister Sol**. “They make you go through those metal detectors – and yet you never feel safe. There’s bullying all the time, and comments about girls and they do nothing about it. They suspend you if you fight back instead of listening to why you are upset or angry – and they say they’re doing it for your own safety, when all it does is to make you feel less respected. They should ask us what we need – what would make us feel better, safer. Give us a voice. We have some good ideas, you know.”

⁴¹ Smith, Joanne; Van Deven, Mandy and Huppuch, Meghan. *Hey, Shorty!: A Guide to Combatting Sexual Harassment and Violence in Public Schools and on the Streets*. The Feminist Press at the City University of New York. New York. 2011.

⁴² DOHMH, Epiquery, Youth Risks Survey, 2014.

⁴³ Center for Internationality and Social Policy Studies and African American Policy Forum, *op cit*.

⁴⁴ See Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University; New York Civil Liberties Union; Make the Road New York. *Safety with Dignity: Alternatives to the Over-Policing of Schools*. New York, 2009

TAILORED TEACHING

The experts agree that in a school system in which students possess widely disparate levels of past academic preparation and widely divergent strengths, there is a clear need to offer every student at least a modicum of individualized attention.

However, those experts continue, given the current constraints – from over-large class enrollment to under-supported faculty members to a relentlessly narrow emphasis on standardized test-preparation – providing such attention is rarely possible. And, as a result, many students never get the chance to “catch on” – let alone succeed. The experts stress that the impact of repeated failure is particularly hard on low-income and immigrant girls who may have nowhere else to turn for academic help, and who may – as noted above – be swiftly written off by their families as soon as they begin to fall behind.

“Girls can be highly math-phobic, and teachers rarely give them the encouragement that could make all the difference,” explains a Lower East Side-based Middle School math teacher. “I noticed that one of my struggling students was really good at drawing – she never stopped sketching. So I began couching my explanation of linear equations in visual terms. It clicked. She says she loves math, now; in fact, she’s one of my best students. But her strengths could so easily have been brushed aside! It is standard practice in private schools to consider what they call ‘learning styles.’ But there’s little time – and almost no incentive – for NYC public school teachers to do that sort of analysis and tailoring.”

The impact of repeated failure is particularly hard on low-income and immigrant girls who may have nowhere else to turn for academic assistance, and who may be swiftly written off by their families as soon as they begin to fall behind.

VISTA-EXPANDING TRAINING, OPPORTUNITIES, AND ROAD MAPS

The experts stress that public schools’ single-minded focus on boosting students’ individual test-scores has reduced the amount of emphasis placed on project-based learning and team-based effort. And that, therefore, students rarely have the chance to develop expertise in areas – e.g., collaborative decision-making, delegation and coordination – that are widely required in many fields of employment. And – finally – that the lack of school-based opportunities to hone these skills is particularly undermining for the low-income girls whose lives are so often defined in narrow, family-oriented terms, and whose opportunities for practicing teamwork are typically so much more constrained than they are for boys.

“The team-building lessons that come with ongoing participation in sports, or in military service, or – heck – in gang warfare are almost universally less available to young women than to young men,” notes one youth development provider. “Those experiences are not always positive, of course; but they at least provide boys with core exposure to the dynamics that prevail in most work environments.”

The lack of contact with... project-based learning and team-based activities... can be especially undermining for the low-income girls whose lives are so often defined in narrow, family-oriented terms and whose opportunities for practicing teamwork are typically so much more constrained than they are for boys.

The experts stress that in addition to depleting opportunities for hands-on group projects, DOE’s single-minded focus on boosting students’ test scores has contributed to the virtual elimination of a whole range of activities – from athletics to arts to

community service – that have a clear track record for opening young people’s vistas, nurturing their talents, building their self-esteem, promoting their fitness, and bolstering their intellectual stamina.⁴⁵

They remark that participation in the arts can help students approach issues more critically, creatively, and independently and that regular, vigorous physical exercise not only improves physical health, it also measurably increases thinking and math skills. They point out that no parent sending a child to a private or high-income neighborhood school would tolerate programmatic cuts such as those that have been made in the City’s low-income public schools.

And, once again, they state that the removal of diversified outlets for achievement takes a particularly harsh toll on the low-income girls whose options for experiencing success are already so severely constricted.

“Too many girls go through school believing that the only thing that counts in life are the scores they get on those Regents tests,” observes a Bronx-based high school science teacher. “That there is no other way for them to prove themselves or to feel proud of themselves. If a girl’s entire sense of self-worth is based on a Regents test score – if she’s never had the chance to shine on a stage, or to lead a community project, or to triumph at a swim meet – what happens when she doesn’t do so well on those tests? What can she do to feel that she is powerful and special? Have sex? Have a baby?”

The elimination of varied outlets for building creativity, skills, stamina, and a sense of accomplishment take a particularly harsh toll on low-income girls whose options for experiencing success are already so severely limited.

The experts invariably end their observations by noting that public school guidance counselors in low-income areas are generally responsible for upwards of 300 students apiece – a staff-student ratio that all but eliminates any chance that young people who have few other independent, knowledgeable sources of information will be able to successfully negotiate all the tasks associated with college preparation and application.⁴⁶ And that – while this deficit of guidance clearly applies to both genders – it can be particularly devastating for the girls who have made such a valiant effort to graduate, only to be cut off at the pass once they reach that goal.

The lack of adequate college guidance can be particularly devastating for the girls who make such a valiant effort to graduate, only to be cut off at the pass once they reach that goal.

The current Administration has pledged itself to address many of the resource deficits that limit the school system’s effectiveness, and to improve the way that it reports on the status of what is available and what is still missing – so as to make future planning more feasible. And, in fact, the initial actions taken on these fronts are promising:

⁴⁵ The City does not regularly produce reports on the status of arts and sports offerings, but the available statistics corroborate these observations:

- According to the Center for Arts Education, by 2011 (the last date for which information was available) – the cadre of public school art teachers had diminished steadily for several years, and the art supply budget slashed to under \$2 per student per year.
- According to DOE itself, as of September 2014, only some 30,000 out of the approximately 325,000 students currently enrolled in the City’s high schools currently take part in the varsity sports of the Public School Athletic League (PSAL). According to the Women’s City Club, only one in five city high school students and only 8% of all elementary school students was receiving physical education services in accordance with the New York State requirements. And – according to the annual DOHMH Epiquery survey of teens’ fitness – fewer than half of the city’s girls of color reported that they were receiving a daily PE class and fewer than one fifth reported that they had been “physically active for at least 60 minutes per day” during the prior week.

⁴⁶ Michel, Clifford, “Ed Officials Scolded for Lack of Guidance Services Data,” *Capital Pro*, September 29, 2014.

- An additional \$23 million has been added to the overall public school arts budget.⁴⁷
- An innovative new athletics program, CHAMPS, is bringing attractive new exercise options to 400 of the City’s middle schools, with the result that many more girls are now taking part in fitness activities that appeal to them – from volleyball to ZUMBA to yoga.⁴⁸
- There are plans to bring 250 new guidance counselors into the high school system.⁴⁹

In addition – as will be detailed in later sections – a small range of individual schools are taking independent action to create environments of genuine safety for low-income girls, to promote their holistic talents, and to tailor academic instruction and college and career guidance to meet their particular strengths and needs. They have been reaching some of the most marginalized girls in the city. And they have been producing some outstanding results.

Nonetheless, the future is far from assured. And the grim reality that only 60% of girls of color graduate high school – and that only one in twelve is considered “adequately prepared” for college – continues to pose a huge challenge for the City.

DYCD I: YOUTH DEVELOPMENT SERVICES

Over the past decade or so, the chief argument for reducing (or eliminating) arts, sports, and

social-emotional-development- and employment-focused programs in the public schools has been that the purpose of schools is not “enrichment” – it is academic preparation. That “enrichment” activities are “extras” that are best offered through youth development providers – supported by the City’s Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD) or other sources and operating largely outside of school hours.

And, in fact, many of the experts consulted concede that – at least in theory – this is a reasonable point of view. They agree that it is probably better (not to mention less expensive) to offer young people theater programs run by non-profit organizations dedicated to this art form than to ask an English teacher to lead students in dramatic readings after a long school day. And they aver that most schools remain less well-equipped to address social and developmental issues than are organizations that specifically focus on this goal.

The experts describe a number of non-profit/school partnerships that are effectively “filling in the gaps” in terms of schools’ arts, sports, academic enrichment, and youth leadership development activities. They cite two major umbrella organizations – Expanded and United Way of New York City (UWNYC) – that are firmly dedicated to supporting this paradigm of enrichment provision. And they mention that City leaders appear increasingly committed to expanding these types of partnerships. They note in particular that:



ROW NEW YORK

⁴⁷ Official NYC website

⁴⁸ DOE website.

⁴⁹ Clifford, *Ibid.*

- Since taking office, the current Administration has doubled funding for middle school after-school programs.⁵⁰
- There is, in addition, generous new City funding allocated towards creating “Community Schools” in which wraparound academic, cultural, and athletic services are offered to entire communities (students and families) through strategic school-CBO collaborations.⁵¹
- Leaders of DOE and DYCD have been sitting down at the same tables with more mutual respect and collaborative determination than they have ever before demonstrated.

Nonetheless – while strongly commending all these actions – the experts also caution that a range of factors continue limiting the potential for effective synergy.

On the broadest level, youth development providers remark that the City has never conducted a comprehensive system-wide mapping of which schools already provide students with effective access to “enrichment” activities, which do not, and which non-profit youth development resources are available to fill in the gaps. Without such a map, truly strategic planning will never be possible.

They also stress that the available funding remains significantly below what is needed to ensure that all the necessary nonprofit supports are in place and functioning – and to create effective linkages between those nonprofits and all the schools that lack those supports (and may not even specifically be seeking them).

And, finally, the providers who specialize in reaching girls remind us that none of the new measures

address the specific, pressing needs of the city’s *female* youth population. In particular, they state that:

- The decision to focus so strongly on the middle school years has deflected attention from the equally important educational, employment, creative, and leadership needs of teenage girls.
- While the intent of DYCD-funded programs is clearly to support vital aspects of general youth development (creativity, leadership, teamwork), there has never been a specific focus on addressing the specific situations, tastes, strengths – and the specific barriers complicating the progress – of girls.

These latter two points are explored in greater depth in the sections that follow.

THE FOCUS ON THE MIDDLE SCHOOL YEARS

The experts in the youth development field allow that the Administration’s new emphasis on programming at the middle school level is both logical and understandable – up to a point.

They acknowledge that it is typically harder to attract teens to after-school programs than to serve the basically “captive audience” of middle school students. That teenagers are both better able to “take care of themselves” than their younger counterparts, and also to find “other things to do.”

On the other hand, those experts also strongly emphasize that there are measures that can be taken to ensure that teenage girls will both want – *and be better able* – to take part in after-school programs. That paying better attention to those girls’ particular tastes and preferences, providing program stipends that would free them from

⁵⁰ DYCD website.

⁵¹ UWNYP, for example, was just awarded a \$52 million Attendance Improvement and Drop-Out prevention grant from the NY State Department of Education (the largest ever) to improve academics and attendance in 40 schools, for 40,000 NYC students, over the course of four years by bringing a ‘Community School’ model involving youth development, in-school mental health services, homework help and family counseling. And the City’s Middle School After-School program expansion will increase services by some 271 providers within affiliated schools.

having to work at McDonalds after school, and offering their families better child care for the younger siblings that older girls are invariably expected to mind would have an immediate beneficial impact on those girls' ability to participate in "enrichment" activities.

"The Administration is absolutely right when it claims that older teenage girls tend to 'vote with their feet' – and that they generally walk right out the door when that final bell rings," remarks Krystal Cason, Outreach Director of *Girls, Inc.* of New York City. "But it's not because they don't want enrichment. It's because so few after-school programs for older girls are really high-quality – and also because so few of those programs include stipends and work opportunities. Teens from families of means – teens who don't have to earn money and who have access to first-rate youth services – enthusiastically take part in after-school athletics and arts and academic enrichment programs. So the answer isn't to abandon the city's low-income teenage girls. The answer is to offer services that better meet their needs."

THE LACK OF GIRL-FOCUSED TRAINING AND PROGRAMMING

Finally, leaders in the youth development field consistently note that after-school programming is rarely crafted to serve the particular needs or interests of girls. They point out that neither DYCD nor the **Youth Development Institute (YDI)** – the city's two largest and best-respected sources of professional youth development training – offer training that systematically prepares staff to consider what girls want and need. And that there has never been a concerted effort to solicit girls' own ideas when developing and implementing programs.

"Let's be frank," remarks one advocate. "Most after-school programs were originally put in place to keep boys – particularly boys of color – off the streets. Girls were not really part of the picture; they were just kind of 'allowed in' when they showed up. Just look at how some of those programs are run! A provider opens up a gym, tosses in a ball, and provides some snacks – leaving the boys to take over the gym floor, snatch the ball, and grab the cookies. Youth programs may be labeled 'gender neutral' but how can anyone think they are anything but: 'boy-centric'?"

What Kind of Message Does that Send?

"There was this basketball program in Brownsville," recounts Benita Miller, Executive Director of the Children's Cabinet, "that had never had much success attracting the girls in the neighborhood. Finally, after much pressure, the director conceded that this might be a problem and that he should do something about it. So what did he do? He reserved the court exclusively for girls, two days a week. He provided no coaching; he offered no encouragement; he simply opened the court and tossed in a basketball. Unsurprisingly, the girls left the ball on the ground and just stood around and talked. So what did he do next? Gave the court back to the boys on those days, and created a prom dress drive for the girls, instead. *What kind of message does that send?* The answer isn't to abandon the athletic needs of girls who haven't been programmed to shoot hoops since they were in diapers! The answer is to hire a dynamic woman coach who can show them what to do, and why it's fun to be competitive and fit. Or to bring in some volleyball nets – girls seem to flock to volleyball. Or to offer Zumba. The girls will come, I can promise you – and they'll show everyone else the moves!"

DOHMH: YOUTH-FOCUSED PUBLIC HEALTH CARE SERVICES

The experts in the field consistently assert that, in recent years, the public sector has made solid progress in terms of expanding and improving health service delivery for low-income youth in general – and for girls and young women in particular.

They particularly cite:

- **An effective partnership between DOHMH and DOE** – the Office of School Health (OSH) – that has created 139 school-based health centers providing students in more than 275 schools with scheduled and walk-in services and 24-hour telephone coverage in the areas of primary, preventive, and specialized health services, and 250 on-site school-based mental health clinics serving more than 400 schools. While there are clearly still many schools that do not have this resource, in those cases in which access has been provided, the increase in utilization of health care services has been significant among both boys and girls; and the benefits have been solid and concrete.⁵²
- **A groundbreaking, effective partnership between OSH and a range of nonprofit providers** that is providing sex education and “healthy relationship” coaching in schools across the city – as well as linking students to 70 community-based clinics that provide culturally- and age-appropriate reproductive services. Currently, an estimated 25% of low-income high school students have direct access to some form of school-based reproductive health support – and there are plans to expand these services to reach 50% of all teens by June 2016. The experts stress that these efforts have been largely responsible for the solid

30% decline in pregnancy rates that took place among NYC girls, ages 15-19, between 2001 and 2011. Nationally, the decline was only 14% over the same time period.

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- **An ongoing barrage of both public and school-based campaigns that have contributed to a decade of concrete declines in girls’ use of alcohol, cigarettes, and hard drugs across all ethnic and racial groups.** The rate of consumption of all these substances has never been high among Asian girls, but they once were significant among black and Latina girls. *And that is no longer the case.* Latina and – particularly – white girls still maintain higher levels of alcohol consumption than the other ethnic/racial groups; and white girls retain higher rates of tobacco use.⁵⁴ Nonetheless, *every group* of girls has measurably and significantly cut back on consumption.⁵⁵ In fact – except for providers in the juvenile justice system (whose clients tend to struggle with mental health issues that make habits of self-medication more likely) – not a single expert consulted cited “substance abuse” as a “top challenge” facing low-income girls and young women of this city – a situation that is markedly different than it was a generation (or even just a decade) ago.

⁵² DOHMH website and CCCNY *Keeping Track of New York City’s Children*, 2013

⁵³ DOHMH Bureau of Maternal, Infant and Reproductive Health website and interviews with Bureau staff.

⁵⁴ These rates are even higher for Latino and white boys; and white boys have by far the highest rates of using both alcohol and cigarettes across gender, race, and ethnicity.

⁵⁵ See Table 2 in Appendix D, based on the 2014 DOHMH Epiquery survey

Except for providers in the juvenile justice system... not a single expert consulted cited “substance abuse” as a top challenge for the low-income girls and young women of this city – a situation that is markedly different than it was a generation (or even just a decade) ago.

- **DOHMH’s “Nurse-Family Partnership” program**, which provides intensive supports (e.g., parenting coaching, information, access to vital resources) to some 2,000 very low-income (generally very young) first-time mothers each year – with impressive results. A solid majority of those young mothers are now raising measurably healthier babies. And they are also measurably better meeting their own ongoing educational and career needs.⁵⁶

In short, across the board, leaders in the fields of youth development, health, and education all basically said the same thing regarding the City’s youth-focused public health-care initiatives: “Keep expanding what you are doing! It’s great!”

The experts basically only flagged two areas as needing additional refinement: (1) tailored mental health and developmental services for girls at the highest risk of serious mental health issues; and (2) services for girls who are at the highest risk for unplanned, unwanted pregnancy.

Discussions of these two points follow below.

TAILORED MENTAL HEALTH AND DEVELOPMENTAL SERVICES FOR GIRLS IN HIGH-RISK SITUATIONS

While rates of voluntary clinical utilization among youth with mental health issues have measurably increased – thanks, in large part, to the availability of appropriately tailored, youth-focused clinics right in the schools – the experts observe that two key population groups remain consistently ineffectually served: (1) Latina girls with mental health issues; and (2) girls in the juvenile justice and foster care systems.

The experts stress that Latina girls have the highest rates of suicide attempt of any group of teens in the city. That, in 2013, a shocking one in seven NYC Latina girls attempted to take her own life.⁵⁷ And that – apart from one sterling program for at-risk Latina teens, *Life Is Precious™*, which will be highlighted in a subsequent section – there exist virtually no efforts designed to address the specific, intertwined psychological, cultural, logistical, academic, and emotional needs of this acutely vulnerable group.

Similarly – while experts in the juvenile justice and foster care systems remark that there has been a flurry of new attention focused on sensitively meeting the mental health needs of the girls and young women in those systems – they also caution that the interventions currently offered remain insufficient to those needs. What is more, the experts assert, there is no formal and effective mental health after-care service structure in place for the girls who exit from those systems – a situation that (along with the dearth of supportive housing) has strongly contributed to the grim number of adult women who cycle repeatedly between the City’s psychiatric hospitals, correctional facilities and homeless shelters.

⁵⁶ In particular, they achieve: (1) higher rates of breastfeeding than young mothers in NYC as a whole; (2) far higher (89% vs. 75%) rates of utilization of contraception during the six months post-partum than young mothers in NYC as a whole; (3) significantly higher (54% vs. 40%) rates of involvement of non-resident fathers in the lives of their children than in the U.S. as a whole; (4) significantly higher (94% vs. 61%) rates of up-to-date immunizations of children than do young mothers across the U.S. as a whole; and (5) markedly higher (67% vs. 52%) rates of achievement of GED or high school diplomas post-partum, than do NYC young mothers (age 15 – 19) as a whole.

⁵⁷ CDC reports, 2014.

BETTER-TAILORED SUPPORTS FOR GIRLS AT THE HIGHEST RISK OF UNPLANNED, UNWANTED PREGNANCY

In recent years, the strategic expansion of school-based sex education programs – and the creation of more accessible, adolescent-friendly reproductive health services – has helped reduce rates of both unplanned teen pregnancy and teen motherhood by dramatic amounts. Nonetheless, the latest DOHMH statistics reveal that, annually, as many as 10% of black and Latina girls, age 15-19, continue to become pregnant; and that several thousand girls a year continue to take on the daunting tasks of raising a baby at a point when they, themselves, still need substantial nurturing and care.⁵⁸

The experts emphasize that having a baby as a teenager does not, in and of itself, guarantee insurmountable problems for either mother or child. They note that a select group of outstanding programs – e.g., the **Brooklyn Young Mothers' Collective (BYMC)**, which will be described in a later section; **Inwood House**; and the **Nurse-Family Partnership** (cited above) – are helping teen mothers to better meet their own ongoing needs while also handling parenting responsibilities with greater competence and maturity.

Nonetheless, the experts stress that the challenges of motherhood at any age are by no means small. That viable and adequate assistance is not always

available to young, single mothers. And – perhaps most importantly – that when girls are provided with the right information and supports, they generally choose to wait till they are better-equipped to manage those challenges.

The experts, therefore, urge both ongoing expansion of existing programs and the creation of programs expressly tailored to help the 10% of girls who remain unreached or unmoved by the “standard” available reproductive choice programs. In particular, they urge the expansion of programming to girls who are in foster care, or in the juvenile justice system, or otherwise surviving with a minimal core foundation of protection and support.

Finally, the experts emphasize, those better-tailored programs cannot really be said to fall within the narrow category of “health care services” – although accurate facts about

contraception and appropriate clinical access clearly remain vital components of any such effort. No, they aver, what girls at the highest risk of unplanned and unwanted pregnancy most need is better overall options and opportunities, better protection against further danger and assault, better access to supportive community, and better preparation for economic paths that will take them and any children they may bear out of poverty.

What those girls need, in short, are better “life-choice” – not “reproductive choice” – services.



COMMUNITY HEALTH ACTION OF STATEN ISLAND

⁵⁸ These statistics are calculated based on Table PO10. Live Births and Pregnancy Rates/Teens Age 15 – 16 of the *Summary of Vital Statistics 2012; City of New York; Appendix A: Supplemental Population, Mortality and Pregnancy Outcome Tables*, Bureau of Vital Statistics, released by NYCDOHMH in January 2014

Vulnerable Girls and Older Predators

The consensus on the city's population of "pregnant and parenting teenage girls" is that it is most likely to comprise those who are in the foster care or juvenile justice systems, those who are forced into the commercial sex industry, and those who are living in the deepest poverty. Girls who have been denied basic resources – or who have been sexually abused – since earliest childhood. Girls who are vulnerable to chimeric promises of protection, of love, of family, or – simply – of a decent meal and a new pair of sneakers. Girls, in short, who are easy targets for the older men who tend to make those kinds of promises.

Newly-released statistics from DOHMH's Bureau of Maternal, Infant and Reproductive Health reveal that most teen pregnancies occur when there is a significant age difference between a girl and her impregnator. They demonstrate that only roughly a third of all the fathers of children born to teenage mothers are teenagers themselves. That fully 37% are more than four years older than those mothers. That another 22% are more than six years older. That nearly 18% of the men who father children with teenage girls are over the age of 25.

"Thanks to the strides we've made in school-based sex education, girls are now better-equipped to protect themselves against pressures for unsafe sex by their classmates," notes one youth development program director. "They can say: 'Yo, don't you remember that whole 250-million-sperm-and-it-only-takes-one thing that we heard last Thursday?' But it's quite another matter when a girl's sexual partner is a 30 year-old who lays claim to wisdom, power, and rights far beyond those of any mere teenage boy. The girls who are susceptible to seduction and coercion by older men clearly need more than what we have been giving them. They need help in understanding their rights, broadening their options, achieving healthier relationships, finding safe home bases, and building true economic security. That is the only way they will be truly protected from those predators' traps."

Or, as Marian Wright Edelman notes: "Ultimately, the best contraceptives are hope and the sense of a positive future."

ACS I: THE FOSTER CARE SYSTEM⁵⁹

There are currently some 2,000 girls, ages 10-18, who have been taken from their parents by the state and placed in the care of a network of 30 non-profit agencies operating under contract with the NYC Administration for Children's Services (ACS).

In roughly two-thirds of these cases, that care is provided within individual foster families, trained and supervised by those 30 agencies. In the last third, it is provided within "group homes." Leaders in the field note that the girls in the group homes tend to be the ones with the longest histories of abuse, the most acute mental health conditions, and the most disruptive behavioral problems. They also tend to be the older ones.

Every expert consulted on this subject stressed the sheer enormity of the challenges that ACS and its provider network face – i.e., assuming full responsibility for raising children who have been seriously neglected, abandoned or abused by their families; healing the wounds that come with such treatment; and preparing young people with minimal support systems to take full responsibility for themselves *by the age of 18*.

More than one of those experts observed that there is probably nothing that even the best foster care agency – or the best foster home – can do to totally make up for the sheer level of trauma, rejection, disruption and deprivation experienced by most of the girls served by this system.

Nonetheless, the experts also almost universally averred that a few concrete changes in policy and program could significantly improve prospects for many of those girls. In particular, that – besides continuing to expand the accessibility and quality of mental health services, as noted above – ACS and its provider network could do more to: (1) equip relevant adults (case workers, foster parents,

biological parents) to better understand girls' particular situations and to react more resiliently and constructively to their behaviors; (2) ensure that every girl in the system has access to appropriate youth development services and a broad-based "community of care;" and (3) work with the City to expand housing options and after-care supports for girls graduating out of the system.

Discussions of each of these points follow.

EQUIPPING THE ADULTS IN CHARGE

As previously noted, the experts in the field concur that girls placed in foster care have almost inevitably endured more abuse, and – particularly – more *sexual* abuse than their male counterparts. And that the girls in that system – in consequence – tend to be angrier with their biological families, their foster parents, and their group workers than are their male counterparts. The experts stress that, besides being more generally rebellious and violent than boys, older girls in foster care go AWOL more frequently – usually in response to the advances of older men who, as also noted above, easily find ways to play on those girls' particular histories, vulnerabilities and longings.

And yet, the experts emphasize – despite all these clearly "girl-specific" factors – foster parents, biological parents, and the paid staff members assigned to care for those girls do *not routinely receive any specifically girl-focused training*. Nor do they normally receive tailored assistance towards managing their own (very understandable) strong emotional reactions to the behaviors – the abusive language, the physical violence, the running away (and coming back unrepentant) – that those girls commonly exhibit.

A staff member from one major foster care agency, **Good Shepherd Services**, recounts that her organization has had great success equipping staff

⁵⁹ Most of the statistics in this section comes from ACS "Flash," July 2015.

Managing Outsized Emotions

The adults placed in charge of working with girls in foster care do not receive tailored assistance towards handling their own (very understandable) strong emotional reactions to the extreme behavior – the abusive language, the violence, the running away (and coming back unrepentant) – that those girls tend to exhibit.

members to address serious behavioral problems using a trauma-informed training approach called the *Sanctuary Training Model*[®]. This form of professional support, however, is not generally available to either professionals or foster care providers, citywide. Nor is even this highly-acclaimed approach specifically geared to helping the adults in charge to understand and address the particular issues and behaviors of traumatized *girls*.

PROVIDING “COMMUNITIES OF CARE” FOR ALL GIRLS IN THE SYSTEM

Most child welfare experts assert that the best approach to helping girls who have been removed from their parents’ care is placement within individual foster homes. That those girls need the individualized attention and nurturing – and the sense of “restored normality” – that is generally best provided within a family context.

The experts also note, however, that individual placements do not guarantee that girls in care will receive the equally important benefits of youth development activities specifically geared to support their healing, empowerment, independent living skills, and sense of community.

And so, those experts invariably conclude, the question becomes how to provide tailored, high-quality

individual and group supports to girls who are scattered across the city under the care of individual foster parents who (as noted above) may have no real sense of the challenges those girls bring.

“Foster parents may not realize that no one has ever asked the girls in their care: ‘what do you like to do?’ Or: ‘what do you want to be?’ Or: ‘how can I support that?’” explains Children Cabinet Executive Director Benita Miller, quoted in a previous section. **“And they may not really ‘get’ what those girls have gone through; what they may have missed out on; or how to make up for it. So they will not necessarily seek out activities that can speak to the cruel absence of options, choice, and community that have been a way of life for those girls.”**

While no leader in this field could offer concrete and specific suggestions for how to achieve this aim – particularly given the dearth of appropriate, girl-focused, youth developmental services in so many neighborhoods – it was high on everyone’s list of topics for astute and committed future consideration.

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EXPANDING HOUSING OPTIONS FOR GIRLS GRADUATING FROM THE FOSTER CARE SYSTEM⁶⁰

Across the board, the child welfare-related issue most frequently and forcefully raised by the experts in this field was the dearth of appropriate housing options for girls once they officially exit the system –

⁶⁰ Much of the statistics and specific information in this section comes from Federation of Protestant Welfare Agencies. *Keeping Foster Youth Off the Streets: Improving Housing Outcomes for Youth that Age Out of Care in New York City*. NYC: 2014

generally at the still-tender age of 18. As previously noted, those experts stress that the lack of resources and services for young people aging out of foster care is a principal driver of some of the direst social and economic challenges in the city. That some 26% of foster care residents enter homeless shelters within three years of their discharge. That at least 20% of the current young people in the City's homeless shelters have a history of having been in the foster care system – as have as many as 40% of the residents of the shelter system as a whole.

Nonetheless, only a very few ACS-funded agencies provide exiting teens with what are known as “aftercare services.” And only a handful of housing programs, citywide, offer appropriate living options to a group of young people who essentially leave the child welfare system with no concrete resources in place. The programs that do exist can be excellent (one of them, *The Chelsea Foyer*, will be described in a later section of this report). But they are relatively limited and cannot possibly accommodate the nearly 900 young people – the approximately 450 girls – who exit the child welfare system, every year.

The net result of these deficits is that most of the girls who exit the system are left to cover their ongoing housing needs through “couch surfing,” through short-term shelter stays, through returns to rejecting parents, or through stays with unreliable or abusive partners. And that many of those girls eventually find themselves navigating the world of homelessness – often with their own babies in tow.

“Young people between the ages of 18 and 21 are still very much in a ‘formative’ stage,” explains one foster care provider. “The lucky ones are able to grow into maturity within the context of their families or of some structured and age-appropriate environment – college or military service, for example. For girls aging out of the child welfare system, however – for girls who have had more trauma and fewer supports throughout their lives

than most people can even imagine – those options are almost always out of the question. They have no one to help them secure that ‘appropriate’ environment. Or to say to them: ‘it’s okay for you to stay here till you find something that’s right for you.’”

The need to create more supportive and affordable housing is hardly restricted to the field of child welfare. It comes up, first and foremost, in almost any discussion of domestic violence, or mental health, or HIV/AIDS, or disability services, or aging services, or criminal justice re-entry services – or simply in the general context of reducing citywide poverty.

Nonetheless, more than one expert stated that addressing this issue for girls at the starting gate of “aging out of foster care” would probably do more to make a measurable dent in the city’s overall crisis of homelessness than any other single approach.

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ACS II: CLOSE TO HOME

Currently, there are an estimated 125 girls and young women under the age of 24 within the overall New York State juvenile justice system. Most are originally from New York City.

Roughly half of those girls and young women – basically the ones convicted of serious crimes – are serving their sentences within secure Upstate facilities, under the jurisdiction of the State Office of Children’s and Family Services (OCFS). The other half – basically the native New Yorkers convicted of lesser crimes – are serving their time in what are known as “non-secure” facilities within New York

City, under a program called Close-to-Home (CTH), under the jurisdiction of ACS.⁶¹

Most of those who are now in the CTH system entered it from the foster care system, but some were originally living at home at the time of their arrest and some were homeless. Regardless of their starting point, however, all the girls and young women in the juvenile justice system seem to share past histories that include similar constellations of factors: intense, long-term sexual abuse and exploitation; mental illness (and concurrent substance abuse) issues; high levels of family dysfunction; and self-defensive violence.

The decision to place NYC girls convicted of lesser offenses in Close-to-Home (CTH) facilities dates only as far back as 2012. It was made under the leadership of Gladys Carrion – the former OCFS Commissioner and currently ACS Commissioner – who argued that young people convicted of non-felony crimes would be better able to reintegrate into civilian life if they were housed closer to the families and communities into which they would most likely return.

While thoughtfully executed in many ways, this program – like so many other public efforts – was not initially implemented with specifically female needs in mind. The girls were basically just stuck into a program model designed to serve the males who comprise the overwhelming majority (75%) of incarcerated youth. And so – evidently, and unsurprisingly – the initial functioning of CTH’s “girls’ residences” was far from ideal.

As stated in the first comprehensive evaluation of those initial two years of operation, the CTH system: “was not originally adequately capacitated [to handle] ...the range of challenges that young women present...the trauma and family strife [that] drive young women into the juvenile justice system.”

The CTH program – like so many other public efforts – was not initially implemented with specifically female needs in mind.

As a result, in the residences assigned to girls, there were initially substantially “higher rates of significant behavioral incidents [e.g., violence, running away] than in the residences assigned to the boys.”

The evaluation goes on to trace that – impressively – no sooner had ACS and OCFS gathered these telling findings than they embarked on a thoughtful corrective course. In particular, they: (1) rapidly gathered and offered CTH providers a roster of descriptions of programs with a better track record of serving female offenders; (2) organized a “Learning Collaborative” through which those girl-serving providers could brainstorm around common problems and solutions; and (3) increased overall resources and support for the girls’ residences – particularly in the area of mental health care and staff training.

And – just as impressively – the evaluation notes that preliminary assessments of the results of these modifications have been highly promising. There have been fewer incidents of violence and fewer girls going AWOL; and there has been higher overall staff morale.⁶²

It is reassuring to know that the newest and least-entrenched component of the juvenile justice system has been willing to scan its programs with a gender-specific lens and to re-formulate its approaches in light of the gaps and missteps identified. Nonetheless, as repeatedly stressed by those experts, it is not just this component of the juvenile justice system – and not just the juvenile justice system – that is in need of careful gender-sensitive analysis and re-formulation.

⁶¹ ACS *Flash* statistics, op.cit.

⁶² The above discussion is based on OCFS; *Close to Home: Year One Overview*; March 2014

DYCD II, SBS, HRA: ECONOMIC SECURITY FOR OUT-OF-SCHOOL/ OUT-OF-WORK (OSOW) YOUTH⁶³

For the low-income young women of color who never get beyond twelfth grade – or whose challenges are so great that they drop out before even making it to that point – one of the first survival tasks is, clearly, finding viable employment. Some of those young women manage to access jobs at a living-wage level. Most, however, move into whatever low-wage, low-security positions they can find. And many remain so unskilled, so unsupported, so overtaxed – so discouraged – that they are unable to enter (or to stay employed within) any job at all.

Advocates in the field of youth employment recount that an estimated 172,000 New Yorkers, age 18-24, are both “out-of-school and out-of-work” (OSOW) – i.e., neither enrolled in any educational or vocational training program nor employed in any viable fashion. They explain that three main municipal agencies are responsible for addressing the income and employment needs of OSOW youth but that none of those agencies currently provides sufficient assistance to this particular population. They describe the overall landscape as follows:

- The **Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD)** – the only agency with the specific mandate to support younger out-of-work New Yorkers – contracts with a range of youth development and employment training providers to offer two programs (Out of School Youth (OSY) and Young Adult Internship (YAIP)) through which unemployed youth can prepare themselves for

jobs “with a future.” YAIP evidently has a strong documented track record with the young people that it reaches. OSY has been less well-evaluated – though the community organizations with which it works generally have excellent reputations. Whatever the actual or potential impact of these programs, however, they are so seriously underfunded that they can only serve a tiny segment of those who are in need. In 2014, for example, they worked with a grand total of 2,835 youth.

- The **Department of Small Business Services (SBS)** sponsors workforce development programs that reach tens of thousands of “young adults” each year. SBS has the reputation for being well-connected to employers in what the advocates call NYC’s “decent-wage” industries. However, the core approach utilized by this agency (basically just facilitating clients’ links to those employers), has proven ill-suited to the needs of young people who have had poor educational histories, who may never before have held jobs, or who need considerable preliminary wrap-around developmental and logistical supports before they can manage steady employment.
- The **Human Resources Administration (HRA)** provides its thousands of 18-24 year old clients with what it calls “workforce services” through two main programs – “Back-to-Work” and WEP. Those “services,” however, basically comprise nothing more than make-work assignments within limited, low-level, temporary positions; and – unsurprisingly – there is scant indication that HRA clients move into viable employment as the result of either of these two programs. Of the 20,000 18-24 year-olds enrolled in Back-to-Work in 2013, for example, only 16% were still in those jobs a mere 30 days later.

⁶³ The discussion below is based on: Center for an Urban Future, *Bridging the Disconnect*, NYC, September 2014; JPMorgan Chase, *Closing the Skills Gap: Preparing New Yorkers for High-Growth, High-Demand, Middle-Skill Jobs*; NYC, 2014; JobsFirst NYC, *Barriers to Entry: The Increasing Challenges Faced by Young Adults In the New York City Job Market*, NYC, 2013; Community Service Society: *Out of Focus: A Snapshot of Public Funding to Reconnect Youth to Education and Employment*; NYC 2008; and Community Service Society; *Missed Opportunity: How New York City Can Do a Better Job of Reconnecting Youth on Public Assistance to Education and Jobs*; NYC, 2011; and Levitan, Mark, *Out of School, Out of Work... Out of Luck?: New York City's Disconnected Youth*; Community Service Society; January 2005.

In addition to these three main agencies, DOE, the New York State Education Department, and CUNY all provide programming designed to support the educational side of the Out-of-School/Out-of-Work equation. In addition, a few independent initiatives run with NYC Council funding offer some training activities. Few of these programs, however, appear to have had a significant impact in terms of boosting long-term employment opportunities for the most vulnerable OSOW youth.



SADIE NASH LEADERSHIP PROJECT

A few advocates remark that there is reason to hope that the overall situation for OSOW youth will improve somewhat under the current Administration. They note that Mayor De Blasio has created an Office of Workforce Development that is potentially capable of bringing together all the agencies that work in the fields of youth and employment to create more integrated policies and programs – and that may be able to marshal additional philanthropic and non-profit resources towards creating better approaches for this population.

They also note plans to: (1) increase and improve the evaluation of DYCD contracts; (2) bring in Community Partners to provide supplementary services to young people arriving at SBS Workforce1 sites; and (3) alter HRA rules to permit recipients of cash assistance to count educational activities towards the fulfillment of workforce mandates – and to more easily access supportive services in the community.

It must be stressed, however, that most of the current plans to help OSOW youth almost entirely ignore the need to address the particular struggles of *OSOW young women*. When listing the barriers that tend to face OSOW youth – i.e., poverty, racism, immigration status, past educational struggles, disabilities, even bias against gender-nonconforming

individuals – they seem to consistently ignore the challenges that stem simply from being female.

No plan, for example, explicitly addresses the effects of sexual harassment on young woman's confidence and opportunities. Or the effects of an over-controlling domestic partner. Or the factors that inhibit women from entering high-skilled construction trades – or that keep them in some of the lowest-paid and least-supported industries in the city. A few plans mention the challenges that come with being a "primary caregiver"

for children or other family members, but they all carefully use the gender-neutral language of "caregiving youth" – as if those caregiving youth were not almost exclusively caregiving young women.

And, thus, of course, none of those plans or policy proposals emphasizes that the supportive services provided to OSOW youth need to include strong expertise in the areas of parenting, domestic violence, and sexual harassment prevention. Or the need to provide training specifically geared towards helping OSOW young women break the barriers that keep them from entering construction and other high-paying trades. Or the need to include educational supports tailored to helping young OSOW women eventually move from, for example, low-paid positions in the home health aide field into higher-paid positions in nursing.

In a world in which low-income young women are increasingly both the primary caregivers and the primary providers for the city's families, this is no time to be "gender neutral" or vague about the particular barriers that those young women face. On the contrary, this is the time to very consciously and very specifically spell out and seek to address those barriers.

VI. THE ROAD MAP FOR ACTION: Best-Practice Girl-Centered Programs

“This is the anti-oppression space. The place we feel safe. The place we can talk about anything! The thing about an anti-oppression space is that it makes you look beyond your own situation to see that there are larger issues at work, holding all of us back. And that we can do something about it! And that is real power!”

– 115 year-old in a focus group held at **The Brotherhood/Sister Sol**

Across NYC, a small number of providers (schools, individual nonprofits, public-private collaborations) are successfully expanding health, safety, and long-term economic options for some of the city’s lowest-income, most under-served girls and young women. While those programs remain the absolute exception – and while the numbers of girls they reach is relatively tiny, given the need – their impact is impressive and their best practices clear, consistent, and potentially replicable. Those best practices include:

- **Taking cues from the girls themselves.** Almost every successful program plumbs the preferences and ideas of the girls they serve when constructing program activities, and engages the girls themselves in planning and implementing those activities.
- **Providing “girls-first” activities.** While there is no complete agreement on whether girl-serving programs need to be “girl-only” or can be co-ed, all successful programs provide safe spaces and designated times in which girls can discuss their issues in the sole company of their female peers. And all also ensure that girls are enabled and encouraged to assume leadership positions in all aspects of program design and operation.
- **Forthrightly acknowledging the challenges that those girls face – and involving them in actions to address those challenges.** In particular, all exemplary programs regularly engage girls in

activities in which they can discuss and explore: (1) the ubiquitous, pernicious societal messages that surround them; (2) their lack of rights over their own bodies; (3) their lack of opportunity to pursue diverse talents, hone vital skills, and gain entrée to appropriate training and job paths; and (4) the ways in which they can change the picture for themselves and for their peers.

- **Providing new, exciting, attractive opportunities** to explore and hone talents, skills, and long-term educational and employment options.

In addition, a few top programs focus on the difficult issues that girls may be facing within their own homes and family relationships; though – once again – there is no unanimity of position on whether this is optimal, or even appropriate.

And, finally, a few programs provide concrete resources (e.g., affordable, supportive housing; mental health care; parenting training; focused employment training) for the girls and young women who struggle with those core survival issues.

The following sections examine the practices and outcomes of some of the best programs in this field.

For the sake of simplicity, the programs are grouped according to some of the principal challenges that they address (i.e., “overcoming the pernicious messaging,” “giving girls back their

Supporting a Girl's Most Important Relationships: Should Girls' Programs Include Caregivers?

There was no consensus among providers regarding whether girl-focused programs should include outreach to, support for, or mediation with those girls' parents and caregivers.

Some providers draw a clear line in the sand, saying: "This is the one space in which girls have no obligations to anyone except themselves – parents have no place here." Others note that primary caregivers (particularly mothers) generally represent the most important figures in most girls' lives and therefore need to be part of any process or solution. They explain that the issues of the mothers are all too often at the heart of the girls' problems; and that – therefore – those mothers' needs and relationships with their daughters have to be concomitantly addressed.

"On Christmas Eve, one of the girls in the program came to my office and said: 'Rachel, can you make my Christmas wish come true?'" recounts Rachel Lloyd, founder of **GEMS** – the city's first and only organization specifically focused on girls forced into the sex exploitation industry. *"I sighed, anticipating the request – iPod, cell phone, clothes... But what she asked me was: 'Can you make me and my Mom get along?'"*

In the end, the answer is probably not "either/or" but rather "both/and." A few providers are proving that it is possible to incorporate primary caregivers in programming in ways that don't derail girls' "safe spaces" or autonomy; and possible to give those caregivers support in ways that ultimately benefit those girls. Programs that exemplify that approach include:

- The **Hispanic Federation's** "Pathways to Academic Excellence" program, which besides providing intensive assistance to college-aspiring girls, also works intensively with those girls' parents – explaining the college application process to them, strongly encouraging them to support their daughters' ambitions, and offering them

assistance in dealing with teachers or other school officials whom they may find even more intimidating than their daughters do.

- **Love Heals**, a former NYWF grantee partner that engages girls and young women in carrying out advocacy and educational efforts related to HIV/AIDS – while providing workshops that support communication between participants and caregivers around the issues of sexuality and health:

"The caregivers we serve tell me: 'I'm so glad someone is making this information available to my child; I wish someone had done that for me,'" states Program Director Sara Flowers. *"And the girls we work with tell me that our work helps them address topics that can be difficult to broach with parents and caregivers. One girl put it like this: 'I [have] become more open with my mother and can finally speak to her about things [generally] considered taboo in the Hispanic community.'"*

- **The Children's Aid Society (CAS)**, whose after-school educational and social service programs reach thousands of girls, while providing a range of complementary educational and social supports for those girls' parents and caregivers.

"The mothers whom we serve are often as much in need of support as their daughters," remarks Drema Brown, **CAS's** Vice President of School Age Programs. *"So, we provide them with parallel services – like sex education or healthy relationships training, and with services all of their own – like ESOL or GED prep. When the mothers complete the program, they get diplomas, just like their daughters. And, I can tell you, there are sometimes as many tears of pride and joy for those girls' mothers as for the girls themselves."*

bodies,” “broadening vistas and opportunities,” “addressing survival needs”). However, it must be noted, most of those programs address more than one of those challenges; and the best ones address them all.

OVERCOMING THE PERNICIOUS MESSAGING

Across the board, the best girls’ programs include components through which girls are helped to name, explore, and confront the undermining messages and conditions that surround them. The leaders of those programs consistently note the relief – the sheer joy – that those girls feel when they realize that:

- They have the ability to fight the forces that have obstructed their own progress and the progress of their peers.
- The “identity” factors that are so often discounted or denigrated in the society at large – their race and culture, their gender, their backgrounds – are actually sources of power and strength.
- Other girls – rather than being their natural foes and competitors – are, in fact, their best natural allies and supporters. That their female peers can be – in the words of a participant in the social-action-oriented organization, *The Brotherhood/Sister Sol* – “other sisters from another mother, who have my back.”

Besides *The Brotherhood/Sister Sol*, model programs anchored by strong girl-centered community action include:

- **Sadie Nash Leadership Project (SNLP):** an after-school and summer-institute-based program in which low-income young women engage in rigorous educational leadership programming. Participants increase their self-confidence, gain the language to express concepts and analyze issues they have thought about or observed their whole lives, and develop a deep understanding of how to give back to their community and a commitment to working for social justice. They seek out new educational opportunities and negotiate classrooms and schooling differently. A 10-year impact study shows that program alumnae have an 81% college completion rate.
- **Girls for Gender Equity (GGE):** an intergenerational organization that operates Sister-in-Strength – a two-year youth organizing program in which high school women of color receive advocacy/organizing leadership training, counseling support and mentoring at GGE’s Brooklyn-based headquarters.⁶⁴ It also runs co-educational after-school programs in three Brooklyn junior high schools. In each venue, it provides academic reinforcement, a range of athletics and arts activities, and social action-based opportunities. Thanks to GGE’s efforts, almost every participant measurably improves school performance. A majority continue their education past high school.

⁶⁴ The Title IX monitoring effort and the “Participatory Action Research” project cited in a previous section grew out of the observations of the girls taking part in this program.

That's What Happens When You Give Girls a Voice!

For many years, **Queens Community House (QCH)**'s evening-based teen programming primarily served young men. Concerned about the consistent gender imbalance, the organization hired a social worker to survey the girls in the community about their low participation rates. The girls identified two main multi-pronged barriers to that participation:

- What they dubbed the 'testosterone-driven' nature of the activities provided – i.e., the fact that:
 - It was all "sports and games" with no time allotted for any other kind of learning.
 - No one was addressing the boys' disrespectful attitudes and language.
- Parental reservations regarding:
 - The lateness in the day of program activities.
 - The fact that participating girls were being taken away from babysitting for their younger siblings.

QCH staff worked to address all these issues. They met with groups of girls to create programming more in line with what they wanted, e.g.: "leadership training," "life choice guidance," "girl-focused fitness," and programs focused on the arts and STEM. They simultaneously began working with the boys to address the disrespectful attitudes and comments. They changed program hours to be earlier; and they visited parents to persuade them that their daughters would be in a safe environment – and that their participation would be so valuable that they should be freed from their babysitting responsibilities.

These efforts have led to tremendous progress:

- The girls' leadership program has been a remarkable success, producing – among other things – an annual girl-led "Community Action" conference that attracts some 200 attendees a year. Originally focused solely on topics of interest to girls (from sexual harassment to teen depression to an exposé of the food industry to discussions of arranged marriages) the Conference has generated such broad interest that it now includes other "non-female-focused" issues and includes boys as planners and implementers (though the principal participants and leaders remain girls).
- The overall atmosphere in the teen programs has evolved into one of mutual respect – with the boys voicing as much appreciation for this evolution as the girls who sparked it.
- Parents have become strong supporters of girls' participation – and have made the necessary accommodations to permit that participation.

The evolution in programming continues, with girls leading the way. They have founded a high-quality girls-only photography course, brought in special girl-focused basketball coaching, and sparked the creation of a break dancing program that has literally put **QCH** on the map.

"Our kids enter all the national competitions and smash all the records," recounts **QCH Executive Director Irma Rodriguez**. **"QCH is billed as one of the 'ten best places to dance' in the country. That's what happens when you give girls a voice!"**

GIVING GIRLS BACK THEIR BODIES

A small but persuasive group of providers assert that the single best way to support girls' health, safety, skills, confidence, and overall progress is through programs that strongly incorporate elements of fitness, exercise, and self-defense. They point out that – of course – social justice issues need to be dissected in discussions and addressed through social action efforts. But, they stress, a core group of specifically female-centered social justice issues – sexual abuse, lack of reproductive freedom, violence, the constant pressure to “be attractive” – are all so directly related to girls' bodies and body image that addressing those issues also requires an explicitly physical-body-based approach.

“What girls in the juvenile justice system need more than anything is physical exercise,” remarks a provider in the correctional field. “Pilates, yoga, swimming – whatever. They adore it. They all have real problems with their bodies – they’ve all been objects of sexual abuse. Exercise helps them think of their bodies in new ways, to feel comfortable in their bodies – possibly for the first time in their lives.”

These experts additionally note that athletics represent a perfect training ground for skills that stand girls in good stead across other areas. That nothing communicates the benefits of collaboration and coordination as viscerally as having to depend on teammates during a high-powered rowing competition or while negotiating a particularly challenging group figure skating sequence. That continually trying harder, continually falling down and getting up again – continually winning and losing and winning again – makes sports an incomparable vehicle for teaching the values of practice, persistence, and resilience.

And, finally, they note that when low-income girls are given the chance to excel at sports that

have not historically been open to people in their economic position – when they become elite-level competitors in elite-level sports like tennis or rowing or figure skating – the feeling of social empowerment can be extraordinary.

Top programs in this field include:

- Figure Skating in Harlem (FSH):** An after-school and summer program that annually provides 275 low-income black and Latina girls with rigorous training in the extraordinarily demanding field of figure skating. Off the ice, all participants receive academic coaching and educational classes in financial literacy, STEM, and writing and communications; meet powerful women in diverse fields; and visit varied workplaces to gain familiarity with a range of potential career paths. To remain in the program, girls are expected to maintain at least a B+ average – and the program's intensive academic coaching and mentoring components ensure that this is a realistic goal. All program participants graduate from high school; the majority go on to complete higher levels of education.
- Row New York:** An after-school and summer rowing program that partners with a range of public schools to serve 2,000 largely very low-income, mostly Latina and black middle-schoolers and high-schoolers each year. Originally designed exclusively for girls, it now serves a small group of boys – as well as small core groups of girls in detention, girls with disabilities, and girls of greater economic means. Qualified participants compete regularly with teams from top private schools, and – more often than not – the **Row New York** team leaves with the medals. In addition to the rowing, all participants receive intensive academic coaching and college guidance assistance. The program produces outstandingly impressive documented results: almost all participants remain engaged throughout their high school years; a full 99% of those who remain with the program graduate from those high schools on time; and a full 98% of those who graduate go on to college – mostly on scholarship.

Nothing Empowers Like Splitting a Board in Two

*“Being able to set boundaries, to operate with confidence, to walk down the street communicating ‘don’t mess with me’ – is absolutely vital to all young women’s growth,” asserts Annie Ellman, founder and first Executive Director of the **Center for Anti-Violence Education (CAE)** – a self-defense and community action-focused organization. “But it’s most vital for those who have lived with sexual assault. Healing is physical – first and foremost – since assault is a physical act. And mastery of skills in the physical sphere leads directly to mastery of skills in other areas.”*

CAE serves some 1,500 girls and young women a year in a range of venues – on-site, in its Brooklyn-based headquarters, and off-site, in collaboration with public schools and other programs across the city. Most participants are very low-income; most come from communities of color or immigrant communities; a large number are gender-non-conforming. The program couples self-defense and violence prevention with group discussions and opportunities for community action. After the first year, program participants have the opportunity to train as paid Peer Educators – teaching other young women at schools and youth organizations throughout the city.

“Through self-defense training, we restore a girl’s feeling of safety,” remarks current Executive Director, Tracy Hobson. “Through our discussions, we let her know that she has an intrinsic right to health, and peace of mind, and hope. And through community-building we provide a support system that is hers for as long as she needs it. One of our core exercises is writing ‘sexual harassment’ on a board and then splitting that board in two with one well-placed blow of the hand. Nothing beats that ‘crack and split’ for restoring a girl’s sense of empowerment. Nothing, except – perhaps – not splitting it the first time and having the whole group applaud her wildly anyway. And knowing that the next time, or the time after that – she will succeed!”

BROADENING GIRLS’ OPTIONS AND PATHS

The experts across the board – from the most grass roots to the most exclusive – agree that what best equips girls for long-term security and success is the chance to explore and excel at multiple activities, to pursue interests that fire their passions, to move beyond the socially-imposed boundaries on aspiration and achievement that those girls so often face.

“If I had to define the most important thing that we give our students,” recounts the head of one of New York City’s premier private girls’ schools. “It is that we free them from the limitations that society so often places on women. Our girls feel

empowered to be noisy, to be boisterous, to be adventurous. To immerse themselves in whatever they enjoy – whether it’s athletics, or Latin, or community activism, or music, or mathematics, or entrepreneurial projects, or designing a stage set. Walk through our halls – you’ll not only see our girls speaking up, you’ll see that they are all clean-faced and simply dressed. These are girls who don’t waste their time trying to look like models. They know that excelling at what they love gives them all the ‘glow’ they could possibly want.”

Most community-based girl-centered organizations have fewer assets than those of a typical private girls’ school. Some organizations can only afford to support excellence in one specific area – whether

When You Get So Much – You Just Want to Do Your Best!

A major collaboration between a national nonprofit organization – the **Young Women’s Leadership Network (YWLN)** – and the Department of Education is pioneering a whole new approach to educating NYC’s low-income girls. Bolstered by private funding sources, YWLN has created five single-sex public schools – one each in Manhattan, the Bronx, and Brooklyn, and two in Queens – that provide an exceptionally supportive education to more than 2,000 low-income girls, grades 6 -12, each year.

TYWLS follow a range of practices that speak to both the strengths and the challenges of their students. These include: (1) daily advisories that serve as “girl support” groups; (2) professional development services that help teachers understand and deal with the issues that their students face; (3) attention to students’ individual learning styles and past academic experiences; (4) in-depth programming in the four core areas of: (a) Leadership, (b) Early College and Career Awareness, (c) STEM, and (d) Health and Wellness; and (4) opportunities to engage in both individual research projects and team-based projects.

“What I love about this school are all the opportunities,” recounts a graduating senior. “We get all the basics – SAT prep, test prep, all that. But we also get to study photography. To interview Michele Obama. To publish a book. To study a marsh that has been overrun with an invasive species and try to figure out what to do about it. To tutor younger kids and get recognition for it – no one ever notices when we teach things to our kid sisters. We meet powerful women who tell us about all kinds of wonderful jobs. When you get so much from a place – you just want to do your best!”

TYWLS Alumnae graduate from high school – and attend and earn degrees at four-year colleges – at significantly higher rates than their peers. Many of them come back to their schools to serve as role models and mentors for the students who come after them.

sports, or community-action, or the arts, or STEM. Others are able to provide girls with opportunities to explore a range of different interests. But – regardless of their particular focus – all the best ones have the same core goal of equipping girls to eschew the narrow social roles assigned to them in favor of tapping varied talents and exploring a range of options for future employment and self-fulfillment.

Besides the social action- and athletics-centered programs described above, examples of outstanding programs that support those goals include:

- **Girl Be Heard** – an educational program for middle and high school girls in public schools in three boroughs that combines support for analytic, critical thinking and writing skills with passion for the theater. The girls create high-quality dramatic pieces on diverse topics of social justice and perform them in an array of impressive arenas – including the White House, the United Nations, Off-Broadway theaters, and theaters abroad – while honing their talents, increasing their self-confidence, and sharpening academic skills that support ongoing progress in high school and beyond. All girls who rehearse and perform earn stipends and have opportunities to assume leadership roles within the organization.

- **Girl Write Now!** A writing-based program that pairs low-income girls of color with mentors in the writing field to produce stories, plays, poetry and essays that are then published in anthologies and read for diverse audiences. The intense individualized attention and encouragement – plus the related group activities and projects – support solid gains in writing skills while enabling participants to make concrete improvements in school, and to move towards achieving long-term educational and career goals.
- **Lower East Side Girls Club** – a free-standing nonprofit organization that provides hundreds of low-income pre-teen and teenage girls from the Lower East Side and beyond with a host of activities and resources that spark, support, and develop diverse interests: photography and film classes; electronic microscopes and a model planetarium; robotics and culinary arts courses; farming and design projects; entrepreneurial projects; fitness programs based around activities that girls love (dance, yoga, hoola-hooping, fencing); a center for media and social justice; visual arts programs that include curatorial training; and discussion and support groups in the areas of leadership, empowerment, and employment. Many of the programs also serve those girls' mothers.



LOVE HEALS

housing in place, girls with serious mental health issues, teens raising and supporting children on their own, girls who have been commercially sexually trafficked, girls who find themselves both out of school and out of work – all tend to need more than just vibrant opportunities, academic reinforcement, and strong encouragement. They need a host of basic survival resources – from permanent shelter to tailored mental health care to assistance with parenting challenges to trauma therapy to concrete job training and placement.

A very small number of very impressive efforts are successfully blending these concrete resources with the core best practices employed by all first-rate, girl-centered programs. They include one organization (the **Chelsea Foyer at the Christopher**) that focuses on girls aging out of foster care or living on the streets, one (**Life Is Precious™**) that focuses on Latina girls at risk of suicide, one (the **Brooklyn Young Mothers' Collective**) that focuses on girls who have become mothers as teenagers, one (**GEMS**) that focuses on girls who have been forced into the commercial sex industry, and one (**Year-Up**) that focuses on helping OSOW young women get jobs with a future:

- **The Chelsea Foyer at the Christopher:** A program developed collaboratively by **Good Shepherd Services (GSS)** (a leading youth and family development agency) and **Common Ground** (a leading supportive housing developer). Designed to be an innovative youth development and trauma-informed supportive housing model, it serves 40 young adults between the ages of 18-25 years who have aged out of foster care, or have experienced homelessness, or are at risk of becoming homeless. Residents can live at the Foyer for up to two years, accessing services including workshops on

ADDRESSING SURVIVAL NEEDS

While the programs described above all clearly produce exceptional outcomes for some of the city's lowest-income girls, a few key segments of that population require more concrete support than those programs typically offer.

Girls graduating from foster care with no viable

life skills, finance, and employment and linkages to services addressing mental health and substance abuse needs. Residents pay 30% of their income as “rent” (the program returns what it has received at program completion); the program is geared to support their residents’ commitment to finding consistent employment and permanent housing by the end of their stay. While this is not specifically a female-focused program, females comprise more than 60% of the overall population at any given time. They tend to comply with program expectations at a high rate and to successfully move on to independent living within the designated two-year timeframe.

- **Life is Precious™ (LIP):** A three-borough (Bronx, Queens, Brooklyn) youth development program that annually serves 75-100 low-income Latina teens who have a history of suicide attempt, a diagnosed mental illness, and mental health clinic support. Framed as an exclusive “Latina Girls’ Club,” *LIP*’s décor, articulated principles and activities are all crafted to reinforce participants’ pride in gender and culture within a safe, welcoming environment. Its programming reflects participants’ articulated preferences and includes: academic tutoring; creative arts therapy; fitness/healthy living training; and individual, group, and family counseling. In *LIP*’s five years of operation, participants’ compliance with clinical regimens has increased significantly; no participant has completed a suicide attempt; and incidents of self-harm and of mental-health-related hospitalizations have plummeted. No girl has become pregnant. All have done measurably better in school – and a core group has gone on to college. Most have improved their relationships with their mothers – and almost all have formed close and supportive friendships with their peers.



FIGURE SKATING IN HARLEM

- **Brooklyn Young Mothers’ Collective (BYMC)** – A Brooklyn-based program providing pregnant and parenting girls with assistance both in managing their parenting tasks and in pursuing their own goals. It offers: (1) individualized counseling and support; (2) a trained helper (doula) to provide hands-on guidance prior to, during, and following gestation and birth; (3) intensive training on sexuality and self-care, and on effective nurturing approaches; (4) educational and vocational counseling; and (5) the opportunity

to become stipended Peer Educators for other pregnant and parenting teens. A large majority of the program’s 250 annual participants remain successfully enrolled in school or other training programs or else find employment. Almost none become pregnant again; most proudly bring their babies to the program to show off their progress as mothers and as individuals.

- **Girls Educational and Mentoring Services (GEMS):** A multi-pronged program that works with hundreds of girls who are involved – or at risk of involvement – in the commercial sex industry. It provides them with: (1) basic survival supports (transitional housing, short-term crisis care, legal assistance); (2) assistance completing school and finding employment; (3) a safe space in which to receive validation, healing, and companionship; and (4) opportunities to take action in support of themselves and others – including an ongoing advocacy effort that has contributed to recent improvements in the laws governing the treatment of young girls forced into the commercial sex industry. Thanks to these supports, a majority of participants are able to exit that industry; most are able to build lives of greater economic security and independence; all receive the help they need to begin recovering from the trauma they have experienced.

- **Year-Up:** A one-year, intensive training program that provides unemployed girls and young women, age 18-24, with a combination of tailored social services, support groups, networking opportunities and internships geared to opening solid employment opportunities. As a result of this intensive, multi-faceted support, a majority of participants are able to move from joblessness to entrée into living-wage industries.

Left Out of the Equation for Too Long: Do Girls' Programs have to be "Girls Only"?

The question often arises: Do "girl-supportive" programs have to be "girls only"?

Some experts are strongly in favor of this approach – they state that once boys enter the picture, they "tend to take over." Or that girls need time alone to "be themselves." Or that the issues that singularly or primarily affect girls should be addressed within the safety of an all-girls forum. Or that – in certain cultures – girls are not allowed to attend programs if boys are present.

Other providers, however, stress that (once again) it needn't be an "either-or" situation. That when co-educational programs feature careful structuring – i.e., time for girls alone and strong ground rules when girls and boys are together – they can be highly useful in their own right. For example, they note the benefits of co-ed sex education efforts that allow boys and girls to hear one another's points of view while ensuring consistent comprehension of which contraceptive methods work and which do not. Or they cite the benefits of having both genders witness the way that girls tend to move easily into leadership roles when given the appropriate encouragement and support.

Every expert consulted, however, agreed that any co-educational effort needs to be intentionally designed in ways that give girls at least some time alone, that highlight and support their particular strengths, and that ensure that they are not bypassed or discounted in any way.

"Co-educational programming can be a very positive thing," states Margarita Rosa, the former Executive Director of the Lower East Side-based Grand Street Settlement House. "But not the way it's usually done. You're not going to get very far if you view it as: 'accommodating girls' or as: 'letting girls in' to activities that were originally designed without them in mind. No, you have to begin with the girls and then 'let the boys in.' So, for example, when we first launched our all-girls programs, they were immediately seen as being so 'cool' – so excellent – that the boys began clamoring to participate. And, gradually, we agreed. But, you see, we had structured everything from the get-go in ways that guaranteed that the girls would be recognized as the pioneers and the leaders of the group. Our society needs to begin setting things up such that the historically 'excluded' groups – whether they be girls, or LGBTQ youth, or new immigrants – are recognized as the cool, powerful, legitimate leaders that they are, rather than as recipients of some kind of 'charity.' All those groups have been left out of the equation for too long."

VII. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION: Best-Practice Girl-Centered Programs

For nearly thirty years, the New York Women’s Foundation has pursued a multi-front agenda of highlighting the critical roles of NYC’s low-income women and girls; fighting for the policies and garnering the funding required to promote their progress; and collaborating with the grass-roots organizations that best understand and support their needs.

This report was crafted using the same approach as The Foundation’s core thought-leadership and grant-making work. Its recommendations for action are derived from a review of all the relevant data and literature as well as from interviews with top academics, government officials, directors of major nonprofits and foundations, teachers, youth workers, and the girls and young women who are – ultimately – the best experts on their own issues.

As can be imagined, the suggestions offered were wide-ranging and diverse. But regardless of specific content, there was a single overarching theme to all those experts’ remarks. If we are to truly make a difference, we need to galvanize a broad sea-change in attitudes and to forge a major, ongoing, coordinated, multi-sector campaign.

We offer this Blueprint as a first step in launching that process – as a way to galvanize attention on the issues, to promote informed discussion, and to provide step-by-step recommendations for constructive change across the public, nonprofit and philanthropic sectors.

Those recommendations are summarized below.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE PUBLIC SECTOR

Improve the Overall Neighborhood Infrastructure of Low-Income Communities: Continue addressing the dangers and deficits that take a toll on girls’ health and sense of safety through increased investment into:

- Ongoing and expanded enforcement of housing code standards within NYCHA developments and by individual private landlords, so that girls can grow up in safe and healthy physical environments.
- Ongoing and expanded environmental clean-up efforts so as to reduce rates of asthma and other diseases in this population.
- Ongoing and expanded efforts promoting the availability and affordability of fresh produce (e.g., support for urban farms and for farmers’ markets); and ongoing community-based campaigns reinforcing the benefits of replacing fast food and packaged food with that fresh produce – so as to increase the overall health of girls.
- Continuation and expansion of the **Community Parks Initiative** and other efforts to increase the availability of safe, inviting public spaces in which girls can enjoy exercise and fresh air.
- Community-informed and -guided policing efforts designed to reduce overall neighborhood violence and the tolls it takes on girls.

Improve selected DOE policies and practices:

Continue and expand efforts to launch or reinstate vital protections, skill-building services, and horizon-expanding supports across schools through:

- Better commitment to enforcing Title IX legislation.
 - The creation of school environments and practices that involve restorative justice rather than harsh disciplinary measures and policing – i.e., that: (1) strongly reflect and support respect for gender, culture, race, and overall student safety; (2) incorporate ideas and input regarding what is expected – and how infractions should be treated – from students (particularly girls) themselves; and (3) include strong supportive services for students who struggle with bullying and violence.
 - Professional development training and supervisory practices that increase teacher and administration ability to understand and respond appropriately to students’ challenges, behaviors, and situations.
 - Professional development training and supervisory practices that better support imaginative project-based, team-based learning; that increase teachers’ ability to recognize the strengths and address the situations of students with different backgrounds, different levels of academic preparation, and different learning styles; and that increase teacher ability to promote gender equity and girls’ leadership.
 - Creation of a comprehensive inventory of the current status of arts, community service, family support, and athletic offerings across all the city’s public schools – and implementation of efforts that will help fill gaps in these areas, through:
 - Continued and expanded reinstatement of school-based arts and athletics programs – such as **CHAMPS** – that have a particular emphasis on girls’ preferences and needs.
 - Ongoing and expanded investment into school-nonprofit partnerships that support arts, sports, youth leadership, and community service programming in schools in which such expanded/reinstated programming cannot be handled internally – with particular focus on engaging organizations that have a track record for – or the strong commitment to – effectively serving girls.
 - Continued support for the creation of **Community Schools** in which wraparound youth development, academic, and health-related supports are provided to students, parents and community residents in local school settings through contracts with one or more community-based organizations.
 - Continued expansion and increased training and support for the cadre of school-based guidance counselors.
 - Expansion of efforts such as career and technical assistance programs (CTEs) that can lead to “non-traditional” careers for girls – and increase outreach to ensure that girls are willing to consider those programs
- Improve selected DYCD policies and programs:**
Make selected changes that will help providers better support the strengths and meet the needs of all low-income youth – with particular emphasis on better attracting and serving girls, e.g.:
- Investing in high-quality after-school enrichment programs at the high school – as well as the middle school – level, with the **proviso** that programs serving low-income teens should include work opportunities and/or stipends, as possible and appropriate.
 - Working with DOE, ACS and the Mayor’s office to increase child care options for younger siblings so older sisters can more easily participate in after-school programs.
 - Investing more strongly in SYEP.

- Training the staff members of all contracting youth organizations to be more aware of girls' particular and special interests and needs, to more proactively include girls in leadership and program planning roles, and to emphasize gender respect and equity in all program development. Provide staff and leadership with examples and paradigms of programs that incorporate those principles and serve girls effectively.
- Significantly increasing investment in the OSY (Out of School Youth) and YAIP; significantly increase evaluation of OSY's impact; and focus all activities more particularly on the needs, preferences, and skills of girls and young women – including boosting efforts that can prepare those girls and young women to enter high-paying apprenticeships in the construction trades, engineering and technology, health care, and other expanding industries.
- Work with organizations serving Latina girls to expand integrated mental health-youth development efforts that can help prevent suicide attempt in this population.
- Continue working with ACS, OFCS, and the provider community to provide better mental health and other developmental supports to girls both during their stays in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems and after they leave those systems.
- Work with ACS and with youth development programs that serve girls who are involved in the foster care, juvenile justice and exploitative commercial sex industry to provide those girls with the resources, supports, skills and options that will help them prevent abusive or coerced sex and unwanted or premature impregnation.

Improve selected DOHMH policies and programs:

Continue and expand currently effective efforts, and make selected changes to ensure better service delivery to certain high-needs groups of girls.

In particular:

- Continue expanding DOE-DOHMH collaborations in the areas of school-based clinical and mental health services, and of reproductive health and choice programs.
- Continue strengthening and expanding the **Nurse-Family Partnership** program that provides information, coaching, linkages, and hands-on role-modeling for young, first-time mothers below a certain income level.
- Continue providing and strengthening current school-based health education efforts, and general public campaigns against smoking – and for responsible drinking.
- Help the staff members, foster parents, and biological parents who engage with girls to access the training, preparation and ongoing supports that will help them more effectively and constructively understand the issues of, interact with, and promote the strengths and successes of those girls.
- Find ways to better ensure that girls who are in individual foster homes have access to group youth development and support services that can promote healing, confer a sense of community, promote safety and self-protection, and help build independent living and other vital skills.
- Give renewed consideration to the ways in which programmatically rich, well-staffed, community-based, community-supported group care might be the most promising and viable option for an expanded segment of the teenage girls in the foster care system.

- Work with the City, with housing providers, and with appropriate youth development, mental health, and other social service providers to expand the supply of appropriately supportive affordable living arrangements for all girls exiting the system.

Improve selected Juvenile Justice System policies and programs:

Continue current efforts to better support girls while they are in CTH residences and as they exit, and extend the same kind of gender-lens towards examining practices in other segments of the system.

Improve selected Workforce Development policies and programs:

Continue building an Office of Workforce Development capable of coordinating policies and seeking improvements to the programs of all relevant agencies (i.e., DOE, DYCD, SBS, HRA, ACS, and CUNY). Projects undertaken by this Office should include:

- Expanding collaboration between SBS, CUNY, DOE, and Community Partners capable of offering appropriate wraparound educational, social, and child care services tailored to the specific needs of young OSOW women.
- Creating similar collaborations between Community Partners, CUNY, DOE and HRA – and continuing to expand the definition and flexibility of activities permitted as part of the mandated work activities required of clients receiving cash assistance.
- Expanding the overall availability of viable, quality child care for all young OSOW women with caregiving responsibilities.
- Sharing information about decent-wage employers and jobs among all relevant agencies, and expanding City support for those employers.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE NON-PROFIT SECTOR

- Train staff and leadership in all organizations around the particular needs, strengths and situations of low-income girls of color and immigrant girls; and build programming that promotes the participation, the safety, the health, the passions, and the skills of those girls.
- When formulating both the evidence of need, the potential for improved service delivery, and the changes that would best suit girls, seek guidance both from seasoned and successful providers of girl-focused services and – more importantly – from the girls themselves. Girls are the wisest and most appropriate experts in this area.
- For providers supporting women’s employment: focus more strategically and proactively on the particular educational, developmental, child care and other logistical needs of out-of-school, out-of-work (OSOW) young women, ages 16-24.
- For providers supporting young women and girls: focus more strategically and proactively on the employment, educational, developmental, child care and other logistical needs of out-of-school, out-of-work (OSOW) young women.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE PHILANTHROPIC SECTOR

- Convene and galvanize the ongoing attention of key funders, policy-makers, heads of key City agencies, heads of major and community-based nonprofits – and girls themselves – in ways that will continually and strongly raise overall consciousness about the importance of this population and the need to modify policies and programs to better support it.

- Directly and proactively seek out and fund high-quality programs that focus on this population.

- Proactively seek out and fund economic youth-focused economic security programs, so as to encourage a stronger focus on girls – and women-focused economic security programs, so as to encourage a stronger focus on young women.

- Underwrite the development and dissemination of position papers on the situation of girls – as well as evaluations of current and evolving programs advancing the progress of this population – so as to broadly publicize successes and to identify areas that require more thought and development.

- Continue convening funders and public and non-profit providers to bring steady attention to success rates, to best-practice approaches, and to the need to keep pursuing these approaches.

- Underwrite the development and dissemination of guidelines and materials designed to enable key providers working under DOE, DYCD, DOHMH, ACS, and in the Juvenile Justice and Work Investment fields to better serve low-income girls and young women of color – with particular attention to creating materials and supports that can equip key adults (parents, foster parents, teachers, social work mental health and medical professionals) to respond more appropriately to the needs, strengths, behaviors and challenges of those girls.



THE POINT COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION

- Fund and otherwise support the creation of linkages and partnership arrangements designed to better serve low-income girls' needs – i.e., partnerships between schools and nonprofits, between clinics and schools, between ACS agencies and other youth development providers, between girl-focused nonprofits and employment training programs.

- Fund advocacy organizations seeking creation – or expansions – of public policies and programs benefiting low-income girls and young women.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Examination of the situations and strengths of NYC's low-income girls and young women leads directly to one major conclusion: Despite their almost inevitable current and future roles as the pivotal providers and caregivers for our city's families, the primary leaders of our communities – and the low-wage care and service providers and workers whose efforts sustain our entire economy – these girls and young women are consistently and perniciously ignored by society at large.

As a result, our families continue to struggle; our economy continues to be deprived of a wealth of extraordinary new skills and leadership; we are forced to continue investing huge amounts of public money into the City's homeless shelter and public assistance systems; and we continue to wrestle with the effects of a shameful, generation-spanning 20% poverty rate.

The evidence is in:

- **NYC is home to what is probably the world's most diverse and vibrant population of girls and young women.** Three quarters of the 800,000 New York girls and young women between the ages of nine and 24 are members of communities of color and of immigrant communities spanning every corner of the globe. And this richly diverse demographic group possesses unique, significant and impressive strengths. The ability to negotiate the demands of different languages and cultures. A deep drive to figure out how the world works – coupled with an even deeper desire to improve life for themselves, for their peers, and for others. And the capacity to contribute enormous amounts towards the support and care of their families, from a very early age.
- **Most of New York's immigrant girls and girls of color live in households with incomes at or**

just above the federal poverty line; and face the fierce intersecting challenges that can come when acute poverty is combined with racism and gender bias. Most have little access to the core resources and protections that all girls require for healthy development: (1) sound housing; (2) nutritious food; (3) appropriate venues for fitness; (4) opportunities to explore and build diverse talents and skills; (5) support pursuing varied educational, vocational and employment paths. All struggle against pernicious societal messages regarding their gender, racial and ethnic identities. Many experience bullying and punitive disciplinary practices both at home and in school. Some face family neglect or rejection. A sobering number endure serious violence and sexual exploitation, both within and outside their homes.

- **Most of the City's youth-focused public and nonprofit service providers have never had either the specific mission or the tailored capacity to effectively support this population.** Public schools, youth development organizations, nonprofits in the economic security field – even providers in the child welfare system – generally have little specific programmatic emphasis on the particular strengths, achievements, and needs of girls and young women of color. They do not proactively reinforce or build on those girls' particular preferences and passions; nor do they adequately protect them from the messaging that undermines them; nor do they effectively help them to overcome the specific barriers that constrain their progress.
- **The combined impact of the steep challenges and inadequate supports is huge.** High school graduation rates for this demographic group remain grimly low – as are the rates of those who are equipped to pursue higher education or solid vocational training even upon graduation.

Most end by entering positions in the low-wage economy without which our city could not survive. They shoulder primary caregiving and income-producing responsibilities for their families but are rarely able to achieve genuine economic security, health, or safety for themselves and those families. And a sobering number eventually join the cohort of adult women who cycle tragically between the City’s shelter, criminal justice, and hospital systems.

- **The solutions are within our grasp.** A solid – if relatively tiny – group of providers have forged strategies and approaches that are successfully expanding options for a demographic that receives such rare special attention. The reach of these providers is – of necessity – circumscribed; but their impact is huge. Their program participants make impressive academic progress, develop powerful skills and talents, lead projects of concrete benefit to themselves and others, improve health and fitness, exercise solid reproductive autonomy, and build stronger personal and family relationships. They move from trauma to empowerment and

emotional recovery, master independent living, and handle parenting responsibilities with greater assurance – and without losing sight of their own goals and needs.

- **Expanding the benefits of these approaches to reach the full cohort of low-income girls and young women in this city will provide incalculable returns.** In particular, it can be expected to produce:
 - Measurable increases in the economic and leadership contributions of a demographic group whose energies have heretofore been overwhelmingly consumed in efforts ensuring bare-bones survival for themselves and their families.
 - Measurable improvements in the situations of the family members for whom they are responsible.
 - Measurable reductions in the resources required to maintain the City’s tragically-engorged homeless shelter, correctional, public assistance and foster care systems.

**WE HAVE A ROAD MAP OF BEST PRACTICES
WAITING TO BE BROUGHT INTO BROAD PRACTICE.**

WE HAVE THE POTENTIAL FOR HUGE IMPACT.

LET’S GET TO WORK.

APPENDIX A: People Interviewed

- Anne Adler**
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- Dena Adriance**
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- Nina Aledort**
Associate Commissioner
Close to Home Oversight and System Improvement
NYS Office of Children and Family Services
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New York, New York 10038
- Lena Alhusseini**
Executive Director
Arab American Family Support Center
150 Court Street
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- Rose Allocca**
Former Education Consultant
United Way of New York City
- Diane Arneth**
Executive Director
Community Health Action of Staten Island
56 Bay Street
Staten Island, New York 10301
- Maha Atthar**
Director of Girls' Leadership
Turning Point for Families
- Tracy Agerton**
Director of Special Projects
Department of Health and Mental Hygiene
Office of School Health
42-09 28th Street, 11th Floor,
CN-25
Queens, NY 11101
- Sarah Axelson**
Women's Sports Foundation
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- Juanita Ayala**
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United Way of New York City
205 E. 42nd Street, 19th Floor
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- Ramatu Bangura**
Director, Youth Programs
Sauti Yetu
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Bronx, NY 10451
- Yael Bat-Chava**
Evaluation
DYCD
156 William Street
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- Luke Bergmann**
DOHMH
Gotham Center
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- Erickson Blakney**
Program Officer
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- Neal J. Blangiardo**
National Sexuality Manager
Children's Aid Society National Adolescent Sexuality Training Center
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- Althea Bradshaw-Tyson**
Principal
East Harlem Young Women's Leadership School
105 E. 106th Street
New York, New York 10029
- Katherine Boudin**
Adjunct Professor
Columbia University School of Social Work
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New York, New York 10027
- Drema Brown**
Vice President of School Age Programs
Children's Aid Society
105 E. 22nd Street
New York, New York 10010
- Linda Lausell Bryant**
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20. **Thanh Bui**
Youth and Community
Services Deputy Director
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21. **Erica Cardwell**
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Hetrick-Martin Institute
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22. **Michael Carrera**
Founder/Director
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23. **Gladys Carrion**
Commissioner
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Administration for
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24. **Brian Chen**
Director of Youth Services
Chinese-American
Planning Council
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Flushing, New York 11354
25. **Cecilia Clarke**
Executive Director
Brooklyn Community
Foundation
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26. **Sharon Cohen**
Executive Director
Figure Skating in Harlem
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27. **Rebecca Colman**
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30. **Jess Dannhauser**
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31. **Angela Diaz, MD**
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32. **Laura Dien**
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33. **Annie Ellman**
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34. **Sandra Escamilla**
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Youth Development Institute
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35. **Gregory Farrell**
Founder/Former President
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Expeditionary Learning
Outward Bound
36. **Michelina Ferrara**
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37. **Sara Flowers**
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38. **Jane Foley Fried**
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39. **Elizabeth Gaines**
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40. **Danielle Gaffney**
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45. **Jessica Guzman**
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47. **Denise Hinds**
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48. **Paul Hirsch**
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71. **Caitlin Masley**
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92. **Ilena Robbins**
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**Women's City Club Board
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101. **Cidra Sebastien**
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112. **Mitchel Wu**
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114. **Helena Yordan**
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APPENDIX B: Bibliography

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APPENDIX C: Programs Visited

Brooklyn Young Mothers Collective

55 Washington Street
Brooklyn, NY

The Brotherhood/Sister Sol

512 W. 143rd Street
New York, New York 10031

Center for Anti-Violence Education

327 7th Street
Brooklyn, New York 11215

CHAMPS Middle School Sports and Fitness League

NYC DOE
52 Chambers Street
New York, New York 10007

Children's Aid Society National Adolescent Sexuality Training Center

360 E. 88th Street
New York, New York 10128

Children's Aid Society

School-Based Programs
105 E. 22nd Street
New York, New York 10010

Committee on Hispanic Children and Families After-School Program at PS/MS 279

2100 Walton Avenue
Bronx, New York 10453

East Harlem Young Women's Leadership School

105 E. 106th Street
New York, New York 10029

Figure Skating in Harlem

361 W. 125th Street
New York, New York 10027

GEMS

www.gems-girls.org

Girl Be Heard

80 E. 11th Street, Suite 301A
New York, New York 10003

Girls Club of the Lower East Side

402 E. 8th Street
New York, New York 10009

Girls for Gender Equality

30 3rd Avenue, #104
Brooklyn, New York 11217

Girls, Inc. of New York City

120 Wall Street, Suite 1804
New York, New York 10022

Girl Scouts of Greater New York

43 W. 23rd Street
New York, New York 10010
Girls Write Now, Inc.
247 West 37th Street, Suite 1800
New York, NY 10018

Good Shepherds Service

305 Seventh Avenue
New York, New York 10001

Grand Street Settlement

Youth Programs
80 Pitt Street
New York, New York 10002

Hetrick-Martin Institute

2 Astor Place
New York, New York 10003

Hispanic Federation

College Readiness Program
55 Exchange Place
New York, NY 10005

Love Heals

2 Fifth Avenue
New York, New York 10011

Mt. Sinai Adolescent Health Clinic

312-320 E. 94th Street
New York, New York 10128

Nurse-Family Partnership

Bureau of Maternal Health and Reproductive Health
NYC DOHMH, Gotham Center
42-09 28th Street, CN-10
Queens, NY 11101-4132

Planned Parenthood of New York City

26 Bleecker Street
New York, New York 10012

Queens Community House

108-25 62nd Street
Rego Park, New York 11374

Row New York

10-27 46th Avenue
Long Island City, New York 11101

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Youth Development Institute

121 Sixth Avenue, 6th Floor
New York, New York 10013

APPENDIX D: Tables

TABLE 1: MALE:FEMALE RATIO

	ASIAN	BLACK	LATINO	WHITE
10-14 YEARS OLD	1.05:1.00	1.01:1.00	1.04:1.00	1.06:1.00
15 – 19 YEARS OLD	1.04:1.00	99.7:1.00	1.04:1.00	1.02:1.00
20 – 24 YEARS OLD	92:1.00	95:1.00	1.04:1.00	89:1.00
TOTAL 10-24 YEARS OLD	99:1.00	98:1.00	1.07:1.00	89:1.00

Taken from Table PC2: Population Estimates by Age, Mutually Exclusive Race and Hispanic Origin and Sex, NYC 2010; *Summary of Vital Statistics 2012; City of New York; Appendix A: Supplemental Population, Mortality and Pregnancy Outcome Tables*; Bureau of Vital Statistics, NYCDOHMH; January 2014

TABLE 2: GRADUATION RATES AND COLLEGE READINESS RATES, GIRLS AND BOYS

	GIRLS				BOYS			
	ASIAN	BLACK	LATINA	WHITE	ASIAN	BLACK	LATINO	WHITE
GRADUATION RATE 2007 COHORT (%)	85	57	56	81	77	48	48	73
GRADUATION RATE 2001 COHORT (%)	65	30	28	62	54	21	23	56
COLLEGE READINESS RATE 2007 COHORT (%)	57	12	13	45	48	8	10	40
COLLEGE READINESS RATE 2001 COHORT (%)	37	7	7	28	28	4	5	25

Taken from Kemple, James J.; *The Condition of New York City High Schools: Examining Trends and Looking Towards the Future*; Research Alliance for New York City Schools; NYU Steinhardt; March, 2013

TABLE 3: ISSUES OF HEALTH: BOYS AND GIRLS

	GIRLS				BOYS			
	ASIAN	BLACK	LATINA	WHITE	ASIAN	BLACK	LATINO	WHITE
PHYSICALLY ACTIVE 60+ MINUTES/DAY (%)	9	17	14	18	24	25	26	30
EATS PRODUCE 4+ TIMES/DAY (%)	18	12	12	21	21	17	15	16
OVERWEIGHT (%)	8	19	19	15	13	13	16	15
OBESE (%)	3	12	11	4	7	15	17	13
ASTHMA (%)	14	23	26	13	23	27	29	18

Source: *DOHMH EpiQuery* (2014 for statistics on physical activity, eating produce, being overweight and being obese; and 2011 for statistics on asthma).

ABOUT THE NEW YORK WOMEN'S FOUNDATION

The New York Women's Foundation (NYWF) was launched in 1987 as an alliance of women of diverse means and backgrounds leveraging their collective resources to promote broad-based economic progress and social justice. The Foundation works on a range of interrelated fronts (workforce development, violence prevention, reproductive health and choice) to advance the economic security of low-income women and girls, and – thereby – the economic strength of the city as a whole.

All NYWF's efforts reflect the conviction that women are the best experts on their own positions, situations, and goals. Its programs are carried out in close partnership with grass-roots, women-centered organizations possessing firsthand, authentic knowledge of their constituents' issues. Its events and publications highlight the challenges and celebrate the triumphs of the women leaders who are the bedrock of communities across the city – and the world.

Since its founding, NYWF has built a track record of impressive influence and impact. It is currently the seventh-largest philanthropic leader in New York City's tightly-packed workforce development field. In 2015, it will raise and invest \$6 million into best-practice programs reaching over 350,000 individual low-income women, moving them and their families measurably closer to safety, health, and financial stability.

MISSION

The New York Women's Foundation is a voice for women and a force for change. We are a cross-cultural alliance of women catalyzing partnerships and leveraging human and financial capital to achieve sustained economic security and justice for women and girls. With fierce determination, we mobilize hearts, minds and resources to create an equitable and just future for women, families and communities in New York City.

¹ New York Community Trust study, 2012.



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