

# Stanislaus County Girls Juvenile Justice Initiative Executive Summary of Evaluation Report

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# Acknowledgements

The planning and implementation process for this evaluation was a partnership of the Stanislaus County Probation Department, the National Council on Crime and Delinquency (NCCD), and the Prison Law Office. The evaluation plan, in alignment with the goals of the Stanislaus County Girls Juvenile Justice Initiative Strategic Plan, was developed by lead evaluator Vanessa Patino Lydia (NCCD) in coordination with Jill Silva (Stanislaus County Probation Department), Denise Locke (Stanislaus County Probation Department), and Lynn Wu (Prison Law Office). Data collection tools for the evaluation were designed by NCCD staff Vanessa Patino Lydia, Juliette Graziano, Caroline Glesmann, and Paige Baker. NCCD gratefully acknowledges all Stanislaus County organizations and individuals that participated in data collection activities or otherwise contributed to this report.

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# Introduction



Across the country, researchers have found that treating justice-involved girls and boys in a generic manner does not appropriately meet girls' needs. Justice-involved girls are disproportionately low risk and high need compared to the overall juvenile justice population and often become system-involved as a result of low-level offenses.<sup>1</sup> The reasons for girls' system involvement are complex and often rooted in challenging family dynamics, such as family conflict or physical or sexual abuse.<sup>2</sup>

While justice-involved girls tend to share some characteristics, they are not a homogenous group. A variety of factors—including race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and gender identity and expression—frame each girl's experiences along her trajectory into, through, and ideally out of the system.

Due to limited resources, many jurisdictions are not appropriately equipped to meet girls' needs at every level of system involvement. However, without gender-responsive assessments, programs, and services, an opportunity to address the issues that lead to girls' justice involvement is missed. In order to address the lack of gender-responsive resources for justice-involved girls in Stanislaus County, the Prison Law Office partnered with the Stanislaus County Probation Department to develop the Girls Juvenile Justice Initiative (GJJI).<sup>3</sup> The Prison Law Office

subsequently planned to use the lessons learned from the GJJI to create a toolkit to assist other counties in identifying and meeting the particular needs of girls in their jurisdictions.

A series of steps was followed to develop the GJJI, beginning with a community needs assessment—conducted by GJJI partners—to determine the specific needs of at-risk and justice-involved girls in Stanislaus County. GJJI partners then used the needs assessment data to develop a strategic plan targeted at improving outcomes for at-risk and justice-involved girls in the county and maximizing available local resources.<sup>4</sup> Based on the strategic plan, GJJI partners developed a girls' task force, conducted trainings on gender-responsive services, adopted a gender-responsive risk assessment system, developed a program for girls called Gender Responsive Alternatives to Detention (GRAD), and adopted other smaller programs such as a mentoring program for girls.

To document the progress of the GJJI, the National Council on Crime and Delinquency (NCCD) conducted a process and outcome evaluation of the initiative. This executive summary is meant to inform other counties interested in implementing a gender-responsive approach to meeting girls' needs in their jurisdictions. For more information, please refer to the full report (available at <http://www.nccdglobal.org/publications>).

# Major Findings

Overall, the evaluation found that despite some mixed results for aspects of the GJJ, the probation department has made good progress and is heading in the right direction with its system reform efforts. The following sections outline the progress made on key areas identified in the GJJ strategic plan.

## **GJJ Task Force Drives Gender-Responsive Juvenile Justice Reform**

A local task force composed of diverse stakeholders led the way in driving gender-responsive juvenile justice reform in the county. The GJJ Task Force includes representatives of county agencies and departments (probation, behavioral health and recovery services, education, public defender, district attorney, etc.) and community-based organizations (CBOs) that serve youth and families. The task force improved collaboration and information sharing among stakeholders and propelled reform efforts. These efforts included convening gender-responsive training for juvenile justice staff and other stakeholders, implementing a gender-responsive assessment for all youth booked into detention, and establishing an all-girls probation caseload. In addition, a number of other gender-responsive policy and practice changes were made, including the implementation of a mentoring program for girls and the introduction of multiple changes in the girls' unit in juvenile hall, demonstrating the probation department's commitment to system-wide change.

## **Gender-Responsive Training Increases Stakeholders' Skills and Knowledge**

The probation department and its partners embraced training as a critical component of reform. The task force convened four gender-responsive trainings during the evaluation period, drawing more than 200 attendees.<sup>5</sup> After attending training, attendees'

self-reported that gender-responsive knowledge and competencies—such as understanding the importance of relationships in girls' lives and having the skills to respond appropriately to self-harming behaviors—increased. The probation department and its partners also are creating a self-sustaining gender-responsive training infrastructure in the county, which will promote the development of staff capacity both as trainers and training participants.

## **Gender-Responsive Assessment System Helps Identify Girls' Risk and Needs**

As part of the GJJ, the probation department implemented the Juvenile Assessment and Intervention System™ (JAIS)<sup>6</sup> with all youth booked into juvenile hall. JAIS™ is a validated gender-responsive risk, strengths, and needs assessment and supervision system. JAIS implementation in the county shows two important trends. First, its use has improved staff decision making on girls' cases, including more appropriate referrals for services. Second, staff support for JAIS has increased over time, indicating that a gender-responsive practice change was institutionalized across the probation department. Additionally, several probation department staff completed an intensive JAIS training for trainers. These trainers provide instruction and coaching to staff and volunteers in probation and other agencies.

## **GRAD Program Provides Critical Services and Support for Justice-Involved Girls**

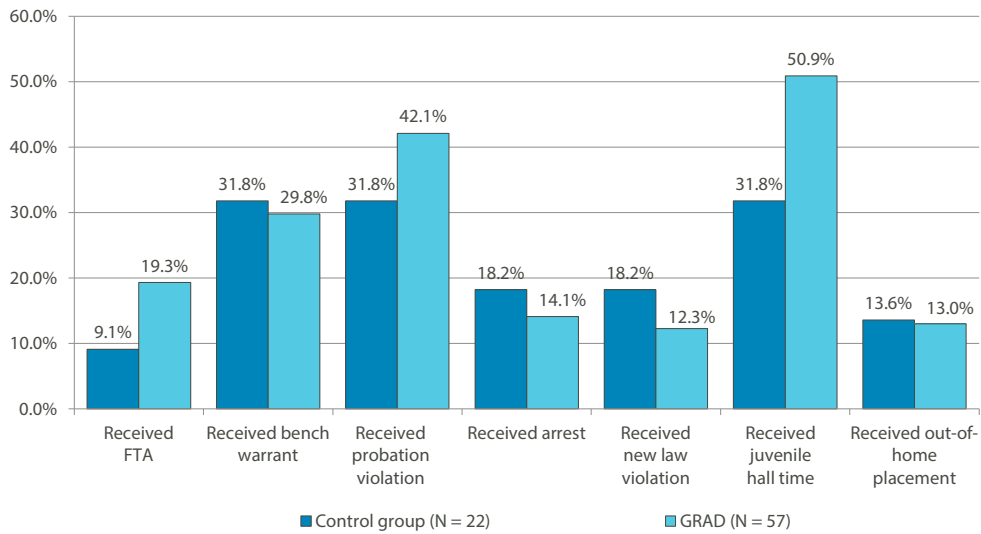
To improve outcomes for girls on formal probation, the probation department implemented the Gender Responsive Alternatives to Detention (GRAD) program. Staffed by a full-time probation officer, full-time case manager, and part-time clinician, GRAD has a caseload of 25 to 30 girls.<sup>7</sup> The GRAD probation officer and case

manager work collaboratively to manage the GRAD caseload, including conducting a weekly case review, attending court appearances, and providing gender-responsive alternatives to detention to girls who are noncompliant.

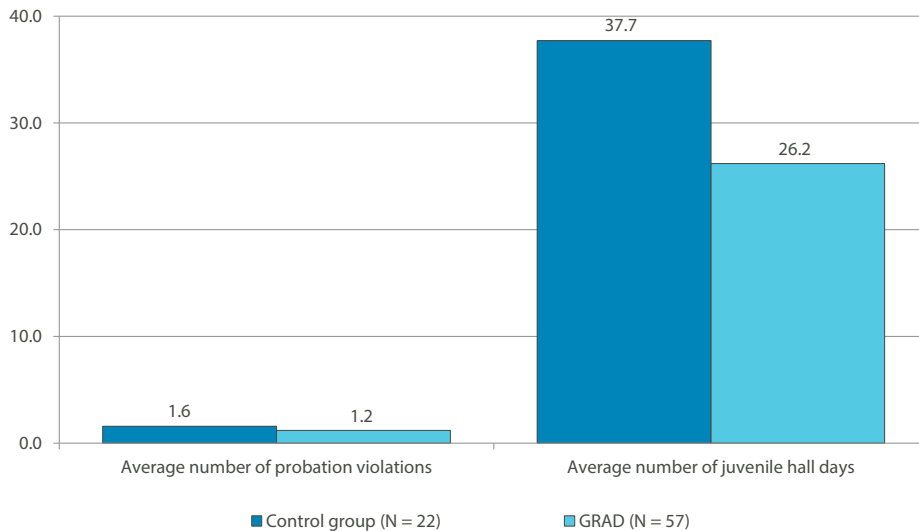
When GRAD participants' juvenile justice outcomes were compared to outcomes for a control group of girls who received probation services prior to GRAD implementation, no statistically significant results were seen. Descriptive statistics for these outcomes show a mix of trends. Examples of positive results

include a lower percentage of GRAD participants who were arrested, sustained new law violations, or were issued bench warrants, compared to the control group (Figure 1). At the same time, while the average number of sustained probation violations decreased (Figure 2), a higher percentage of GRAD participants than control group members had sustained probation violations (Figure 1). Similarly, while GRAD participants had a lower average number of days in juvenile hall (Figure 2), a higher percentage of GRAD participants were detained (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Juvenile Justice Outcomes  
Control Group and GRAD**



**Figure 2: Probation Violations and Juvenile Hall Days  
Control Group and GRAD**



These mixed results may be due to various factors. Best practice suggests that intensive interventions for justice-involved youth, like GRAD, should focus on moderate- to high-risk probationers.<sup>8</sup> The distribution of risk levels for GRAD participants (11% low risk, 55% moderate risk, and 34% high risk)<sup>9</sup> indicates that while the probation department is very close to best practice with regard to risk levels, GRAD may still have too many low-risk girls to meet its goals. Additionally, GRAD participants' increases in probation violations and referrals to detention are not surprising for a new program with an intensive caseload. Increased scrutiny often leads to increased sanctions. Finally, it is important to note that the majority of GRAD participants' technical violations were addressed with noncustodial options, demonstrating a shift from previous probation practices.

In addition to focusing on juvenile justice outcomes, GRAD seeks to improve participants' well-being outcomes. In surveys, focus groups, and interviews, GRAD participants reported experiencing numerous positive outcomes in areas such as school attendance, academic performance, family relationships, and understanding of community resources.

## GJJ Introduces Numerous Improvements to Programming and Practices for Girls

The GJJ motivated a variety of other gender-responsive programming and practice changes. This included implementing the Mentoring Youth (MY) Project, a collaboration of the probation department and a local CBO.<sup>10</sup> Through the MY Project, trained volunteers provide one-on-one mentoring to girls in juvenile hall, in placement (if applicable), and upon release to the community. While findings are limited due to a small sample size, preliminary data suggest this program positively impacts mentees. The GJJ also led to implementation of a gender-specific substance abuse treatment program and numerous changes in the girls' unit in juvenile hall, such as convening a youth-led discussion group and having family-style meals. In addition, the probation department contracted with a consultant to review juvenile hall policies from a gender-responsive lens. A task force subcommittee is now working on implementing the suggestions provided by the consultant.



# Moving Forward



The GJJJ has made a number of promising changes. The initiative has developed a strong collaboration with county agencies and CBOs to drive gender-responsive work. The probation department is creating a sustainable training infrastructure. The GRAD program appears to be lowering arrests, new law violations, and bench warrants for participants while improving well-being. The department also has made structural changes like adopting a graduated sanctions grid.

Other outcomes are more mixed; however, with effort, Stanislaus County can continue to improve the ways it meets girls' needs through practice changes such as a greater focus on high-risk girls as GRAD participants and the implementation of a probation violation response grid that considers risk level.

Since the evaluation was completed in September 2013, the probation department and its partners have continued to make progress. The GJJJ began its next phase in February 2014 with an updated strategic plan and the designation of a member of the probation department management team to lead the task force. Task force participation has expanded to include a wider range of partners. While some challenges remain, the ongoing leadership, commitment, and creativity of the probation department and other organizations will help Stanislaus County continue its now well-established path toward improving outcomes for justice-involved girls and their families.

# Notes and Resources

<sup>1</sup> The existing research is not clear about whether girls actually commit more status offenses or if they are arrested for more status offenses, compared to boys. More in-depth research is needed to understand behavior differences across gender and differences in system responses across gender.

<sup>2</sup> Acoca, L. (1999). Investing in girls: A 21st century strategy. *Juvenile Justice*, 6(1), 3–13; Acoca, L., & Dedel, K. (1998). *No place to hide: Understanding and meeting the needs of girls in the California juvenile justice system*. San Francisco, CA: National Council on Crime and Delinquency; Holsinger, K., & Holsinger, A. M. (2005). Differential pathways to violence and self-injurious behavior: African-American and white girls in the juvenile justice system. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, 42, 211–242.

<sup>3</sup> While there are various definitions for gender responsiveness, one commonly used definition, which provides the GJJ's framework, is: "...[C]reating an environment through site selection, staff selection, program development, content, and material that reflects an understanding of the realities of women's lives and addresses the issues of the participants. Gender-responsive approaches are multidimensional and based on theoretical perspectives that acknowledge women's pathways into the criminal justice system. These approaches address social (e.g., poverty, race, class, and gender inequality) and cultural factors, as well as therapeutic interventions. These interventions address issues such as abuse, violence, family relationships, substance abuse, and co-occurring disorders. They provide a strength-based approach to treatment and skill building." Bloom, B., & Covington, S. (2000). *Gendered justice: Programming for women in correctional settings*. Paper presented to the American Society of Criminology, San Francisco, CA, p. 11.

<sup>4</sup> National Council on Crime and Delinquency. (2010). *Stanislaus County Girls Juvenile Justice Initiative Strategic plan*. Oakland, CA: Author.

<sup>5</sup> Because some staff from the probation department and other agencies attended multiple trainings, this number does not represent unduplicated individuals.

<sup>6</sup> JAIS (<http://nccdglobal.org/assessment/juvenile-assessment-and-intervention-system-jais>) was developed by NCCD and is used in many jurisdictions nationwide.

<sup>7</sup> During the evaluation period of July 2011 through September 2013, the probation department contracted with a local CBO for the case manager and clinician positions. After September 2013, the probation department continued contracting with the CBO for the case manager position, which has remained full time. However, due to funding limitations, the clinician now works with GRAD participants on a more limited basis; additionally, staffing is provided by Stanislaus County Behavioral Health and Recovery Services rather than by a CBO.

<sup>8</sup> Lipsey, M., Howell, J. C., Kelly, M. R., Chapman, G., & Carver, D. (2010). *Improving the effectiveness of juvenile justice programs: A new perspective on evidence-based practice*. Washington, DC: Center for Juvenile Justice Reform, Georgetown University.

<sup>9</sup> The distribution of risk for the control group was 38% low risk, 43% moderate risk, and 19% high risk. Different validated risk assessments were used for control group girls and for GRAD participants, making a direct comparison of risk levels difficult.

<sup>10</sup> The MY Project is based on a gender-responsive mentoring model developed by the Youth Justice Institute.