STRONGER, SMARTER, BOLDER:
GIRLS TAKE THE LEAD

girls inc. Inspiring all girls to be strong, smart, and bold

“ **The future success of our global economy relies on girls having access to the education and resources they need for careers and leadership roles in finance, economics and technology....when girls are given the opportunities to reach their full potential, all of society benefits.** ”

Arlene Isaacs-Lowe
Global Head of CSR at Moody's Corporation
and President of the Moody's Foundation

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FOREWORD

Girls are innately powerful. In recent years many examples of impressive girls and young women—Emma Gonzalez, Jazz Jennings, Yara Shahidi, Greta Thunberg, Malala Yousafzai, and many others—have demonstrated the kind of leadership that girls can provide, once they get the support and experience that helps them make the most of their potential.

For the first time in history, we can state with certainty that **our next generation of leaders will be a generation of women leaders**—particularly women leaders of color, many of whom will start out at a socioeconomic disadvantage. This means that more girls, and more girls of color, need to be prepared to step into leadership roles. Girls Inc., along with a number of other organizations that focus on young women, works with girls throughout the United States and Canada, inspiring them to lead healthy lives, succeed academically, and advocate for themselves and others.

And yet, **despite the inherent promise that girls represent, tremendous challenges still stand in their way:** obstacles to their physical and socio-emotional wellbeing, inequities in educational opportunities, and discouragement, even outright suppression, when they try to speak for themselves and others. At their root, many of these challenges result directly from poverty, bias, health challenges, and trauma. In 2020—a year that practically begs for clear vision—too many girls still face the oldest dilemmas for women, and too few can see a way forward.

This report seeks to clarify some of the key challenges that girls face, especially girls of color, and to offer recommendations about the kinds of supports and experiences that help them push past those obstacles. There is no question: When they are healthier physically and emotionally, when they have the intellectual tools and persistence they need, when they feel confident about engaging with others and know how to stand up and speak out—that's when girls succeed.

A range of recent studies has pointed out just how persistent the barriers to success are, as summarized in this report. For instance, despite dramatic decreases in teen pregnancy rates, girls who get pregnant as teenagers—and they are disproportionately urban and rural girls, girls of color, and girls with low self-esteem—are far less likely to finish high school. Girls are increasingly more likely to have encounters with the juvenile justice system for minor offenses, and statistically, that sets them up for future encounters, as well as makes them more likely to become victims of violence. Girls who are highly sexualized at an early age are at greater risk of valuing themselves in terms of their relationships, which, research shows, generally means less self-confidence and overall poorer mental health.

Such factors, of course, also make girls far less likely to be fully employed, to stay healthy, to vote, or to run for office. The waste of human possibility is tremendous. The waste of potential for women's leadership is devastating.

So what does it take not only to stem these losses, but to create the conditions for girls to become strong leaders? Following a research study conducted by the American Institutes for Research (AIR), Girls Inc. recommends four crucial supports that allow girls to realize their potential:

THE RIGHT RELATIONSHIPS.

When girls have models of success and the perspectives of strong women, they thrive. Robust peer networks and safe environments also help them create positive relationships with others. Compared to other girls in their communities, girls who have had the mentoring relationships and the all-girl, pro-girl environment that Girls Inc. offers are **more likely to have positive relationships with adults and see them as allies, as well as to see themselves as leaders.**

ENCOURAGEMENT TO DEVELOP AND USE THEIR VOICES.

Girls' thoughts and opinions matter. They are amazing advocates for themselves, for each other, and for important causes when they know how, when, and where to get their point across. Girls Inc. engages girls in externships and advocacy work, enabling them to develop their voices and build self-confidence. They are **more likely to stand up for their beliefs and for fairness, and they are also more likely to believe that they can influence and improve their local communities.**

A POSITIVE SELF-IMAGE.

Successful girls appreciate their bodies (and all kinds of bodies), and they make choices that keep them healthy and allow them to manage stress. They experience the sheer joy that comes from being comfortable with themselves, both physically and emotionally. They are thoughtful and careful in taking ownership of their sexuality, and in making choices that will help them lead satisfying, safe, and healthy lives. The opportunities that Girls Inc. girls receive—whether learning about nutrition and exercise or simply developing a stronger self-image—make them **more likely to participate in sports teams and exercise regularly.**

INTELLECTUAL CONFIDENCE.

For these girls who are ready to lead, education is not just preparation for the next milestone in life. It is a habit of mind that will allow them to learn all their lives, across all fields. Girls Inc. girls are **more likely to attend school and be positively engaged in school. In fact, their school suspension rates are 79 percent lower. They are also more likely to show affinity and curiosity for STEM subjects, have self-confidence in reading and STEM, and see themselves in STEM careers in the future. They have higher standardized math test scores. They are more prepared for life after high school (whether college or work).**

Women have always been about half of the population, but they have never, until the current generation, had the seat at the table that they deserve. Now that opportunities for leadership are beginning to open to women in unprecedented ways, all girls should be prepared to lead. What is more, the proportion of women of color within the population of women is increasing in the U.S. and Canada. Within our lifetimes, easily a third of all Americans will be women from underrepresented minorities—to whom leadership opportunities have for too long been denied. We cannot afford any longer to waste this human capital. In fact, we never could.

In truth, the work that best supports girls is more a matter of providing them with opportunity than of empowering them. The latter suggests they need us to give them power they do not have. But girls are already powerful. They are leaders. They are strong, smart, and bold. To the extent that poverty, prejudice, and inequity continue to hold girls back, we can and must invest in their promise, so that they can make a difference in their lives. When we give girls tools and opportunities, not only do they change their own circumstances, they also change the circumstances of others around them. They change the world.

INTRODUCTION

Many of the challenges that girls face today—especially girls of color—are longstanding. Some have seen improvement in recent decades, but all still need attention. This report offers an overview of the latest data on some of those challenges and where girls stand with respect to them. Together, these data provide a set of indicators of girls' wellbeing today in the U.S. and Canada.

Because Girls Inc. inspires girls to be **strong**, **smart**, and **bold**, the indicators presented are aligned with these aspirations:

STRONG:
- physical wellbeing
- emotional wellbeing and mental health
- avoidance of teen pregnancy
- avoidance of substance use
- low levels of interaction with the juvenile justice system

SMART:
- high levels of educational attainment
- high rates of graduation and postsecondary readiness
- good school attendance and school discipline histories
- success in overcoming historical barriers, such as representation in the fields of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics

BOLD:
- demonstrated leadership
- self-advocacy and advocacy for others
- self-confidence and successful navigation of bullying and other environmental challenges
- healthy relationships with peers and adults

The short profiles of these topics that follow assess how American and Canadian girls are doing on each of these dimensions. In most of these areas, the proven programming that Girls Inc. offers can demonstrate significant advances.

EVALUATING THE GIRLS INC. EXPERIENCE:
At the heart of Girls Inc. is a comprehensive approach to whole girl development that equips girls to navigate gender, economic, and social barriers and to grow up healthy, educated, and independent. This approach—the Girls Inc. Experience—is the foundation of Girls Inc. programming, and engages girls in opportunities and activities that develop skills and instill leadership characteristics. As shown in a recent assessment by the American Institutes for Research (AIR), the Girls Inc. Experience makes a measurable and marked difference in the lives of girls.

RESEARCH PARTNERSHIP & OVERVIEW

Girls Inc. leadership and affiliates have long known through daily observation, as well as internal evaluation, that the Girls Inc. Experience has positive and lasting effects for the girls who participate. In 2017, to back that anecdotal knowledge with independent research, Girls Inc. entered into a partnership with the American Institutes for Research (AIR).

The American Institutes for Research is a not-for-profit research organization with best-in-class experts focused on social science research, evaluation, and technical assistance. With funding from the Lilly Endowment, Inc., the Cummins Foundation, and the Girls Inc. National Board, the AIR research team, led by Principal Investigator Dr. Allison Dymnicki, examined the role of Girls Inc. in helping girls attain various outcomes. This study documents the ways in which girls are benefitting from Girls Inc. programming. The ultimate intent: to show what difference a high-quality Girls Inc. Experience makes in the lives of girls.

RESEARCH STUDY

From 2017 to 2019, AIR implemented a quasi-experimental research study with four Girls Inc. affiliates and their school districts in small, medium, and large communities that were reflective of the larger Girls Inc. network.

The data from the study came from two main sources:
- a self-reported outcomes survey taken by girls age 9–18 that measures indicators of success in three areas (Strong/Healthy Living, Smart/Academic Success, and Bold/Life skills or Character, Social, and Emotional Development), and
- school-related academic and behavioral data from partner schools.

To examine the impact of Girls Inc. on participants' academic and behavioral outcomes, compared to similar non-participating girls, AIR followed a three-stage approach. First, researchers used propensity score matching to identify a group of non-participating girls who were similar to Girls Inc. participants in the four selected districts. Second, AIR conducted multilevel regression models to examine differences in academic and behavioral outcomes between Girls Inc. girls and similar non-participating girls, separately for each district. Third, the research team pooled the individual district effects for each outcome across the four districts using meta-analysis. Statistical sampling techniques ensured that the groups of girls were as similar as possible, allowing for confidence that any positive results are due to Girls Inc. programming rather than other factors.

> " In a rigorous comparison study, we found that girls who participate in the Girls Inc. Experience demonstrated improved academic performance, school-related behaviors, physical activity, and leadership outcomes. "
>
> Dr. Deborah Moroney, Managing Director of the American Institutes for Research

RESEARCH OUTCOMES

On 24 dimensions, Girls Inc. girls did significantly better than girls who had not had the Girls Inc. Experience. They were more likely to engage in pursuits and express beliefs that lead to physical and mental wellbeing, academic achievement, and strong character and leadership. The following issue profiles provide context for these research outcomes (see also the Summary of Findings in Appendix). Research outcomes based on other studies and sources in the field are summarized in these profiles, without full citations; full citations are available on request for those interested in more detail.

The research indicators that this report comprises cover a range of topic areas. While not all focus directly on leadership and leadership development, all of them correlate with the physical, mental, and socio-emotional well being that makes for strong future leaders. Girls who grow up healthy, educated, and independent are girls who are ready to take the lead.

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PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

OVERVIEW

Girls' confidence to lead rests on the foundation of their wellbeing. **Girls who are physically active tend to have improved cognition, higher self-esteem, and a more positive body image.** They report lower rates of depression and anxiety, and lead more active lifestyles as adults. In the United States and Canada, it is recommended that children and youth engage in at least one hour of active play or participation in an organized sport daily. In the U.S., 20% of girls report that they are meeting this target, as compared to 28% of boys who report engaging in an hour of activity. In Canada, girls are a bit more active, but boys are still nearly twice as likely to meet the daily requirement (52% of boys vs. 26% of girls). Insufficient physical activity is a risk factor for other conditions, including obesity, which can have long-term health effects.

**GIRLS INC. GIRLS
SPORTS PARTICIPATION AND FAMILY INCOME**

SPORTS	TOTAL COST
Basketball	$660
Cross country	$421
Gymnastics	$1,580
Soccer	$537
Softball	$613
Swimming	$786
Tennis	$1,170
Track and field	$191
Volleyball	$595

CHANGING TRENDS

Despite increasing awareness of the value of physical activity, the percentage of girls in the US engaging in at least 60 minutes of physical activity every day has decreased from 23.9% in 2007 to 20.2% in 2016. In both the US and Canada, activity levels tend to decrease as a girl gets older. **Participation in organized sports remains an important way for children to meet physical activity requirements,** but several factors make participation in team sports harder for girls, especially those attending public schools.

Girls ages 6–12 are less likely than boys to participate in team sports (52.8% vs 61.1%). Girls tend to start sports at a later age than boys (7.4 years old vs. 6.8 years old) and they drop out of sports at a higher rate, twice as fast by age 14. And schools are offering fewer sports programs—from 2000 to 2015, the number of schools that offered no sports program nearly doubled.

There is some good news: child and adolescent obesity rates have plateaued since the early 2000s in both the U.S. and Canada, although obesity prevalence remains quite high, especially for girls. Not surprisingly, higher obesity rates are linked to lower income, 18.9% for children from the lowest income group compared with 10.9% for children from the highest income group. Black girls have the highest rate of obesity (20.7%) while Asian girls have the lowest rate of obesity (5.3%).

GIRLS AFFECTED

Girls of color and girls from low-income neighborhoods have reduced levels of physical activity when compared with White girls; one study found that Black girls were the least active among all racial/ethnic groups. In addition, **girls living in urban areas are less likely to get the daily recommended physical activity as a result of attending under-resourced schools.** Living in high-crime neighborhoods could also lead to less participation in physical activities, since going to and from sports facilities in the early morning and late evening hours may be less safe for girls traveling alone.

For girls in urban areas, 84% report having no PE classes in 11th and 12th grades, while 68% of girls in rural areas did not have access to PE classes in these grades.

SCREEN TIME

For many children, the allure of technology and television is strong, and there has been an increase in sedentary behaviors, defined as activities that are done while sitting, reclining or lying down and have low energy expenditure. Screen time is often used as a proxy for measuring sedentary behavior, and current American Pediatric Association screen time guidelines recommend 2 hours a day or less. Only 38% of girls in the U.S. and 33% of girls in Canada meet this requirement. Numerous studies have linked sedentary behaviors to an increased risk of being overweight or obese among teens.

CONTRIBUTING FACTORS

There are several theories as to why physical activity in girls declines as they get older; some researchers have attributed the decline to pervasive gender stereotypes that lead adolescent girls to view sports as a "male" activity while others have cited the increased costs of sports participation, a declining quality of experience, and lack of access. A study that looked at participation in high school sports found that 53 athletic opportunities were offered for every 100 boys, compared with 41 opportunities for every 100 girls. What's more, **the cost of sports participation is increasing. 33% of Black parents reported that their daughter either had never participated in sports or had to stop participating due to the cost of participation.**

EFFECTS ON GIRLS' OUTCOMES

Engaging in physical activity as a teen helps girls maintain healthier lifestyles as adults. Conversely, physical inactivity in girls has been linked to a number of poor health-related outcomes. Physical inactivity is a risk factor for obesity, which has a number of negative associated health effects, including placing girls at higher risk of developing Type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, low self-esteem, depression and distorted body image. Additionally, overweight children are at higher risk of becoming overweight adults, which places them at heightened risk for developing chronic conditions like heart disease. **Girls who participate in physical activities receive a number of health benefits, including improved cognition and higher self-esteem. Girls who play on a sports team report greater life satisfaction and feel healthier than girls who don't.** Ultimately, physical and mental wellbeing underpin girls' ability to lead.

THE VIEW FROM GIRLS INC.

While a little less than half of all high school girls in the U.S. played on a sports team in 2017 (49%, YRBS), 56% of **Girls Inc. high schoolers played on one or more teams in 2019, up from 49% the year before.** Given the negative correlation between family income and sports participation, that's a significant victory!

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STRONG

MENTAL HEALTH

OVERVIEW

To lead and thrive, girls need to be emotionally strong. **Yet the prevalence of depression and anxiety is increasing among teen girls in the U.S. and Canada.** In the U.S. today, 1 in 5 teenagers has a mental health episode in a given year. And although the prevalence of mood disorders such as depression is roughly the same for pre-teen girls and boys—3% to 5%—by mid-adolescence, 14% to 20% of girls are diagnosed with a mood disorder. That's twice the prevalence of such diagnoses for boys.

While many mental illnesses can be managed with treatment, treatment rates remain low for girls and teenagers with mental health issues. In some communities, seeking treatment for mental health is stigmatized, and girls are afraid to ask for help. Other times, lack of insurance coverage or qualified providers can prevent girls from getting treatment. In fact, the majority of the U.S. faces a shortage of child and teen psychiatrists, with fewer than 17 providers available per 100,000 children. While estimates vary, it is predicted that less than 60% of children with anxiety receive care; among children living below the federal poverty level, this estimate drops to 15%. In Canada, only one in five is treated. **This is especially concerning given that mental health issues are more pronounced for girls living in low-income communities, where access to healthcare is limited and where living conditions can have a significant impact on mental health.**

CHANGING TRENDS

A recent study found that when compared with teens in previous decades, more teens today are experiencing major depression, suicidal thoughts, and psychological distress. For girls, these issues are especially acute. From 2005 to 2014, the prevalence of major depressive episodes increased from 13.1% to 17.3% in girls. In 2017, 22% of high school girls reported that they had considered attempting suicide. Once again, these mental health challenges that have intensified for all teens are disproportionately difficult for girls: Pew Study found that 36% of teen girls say they feel tense or nervous daily or almost daily, compared to 23% of teen boys.

GIRLS AFFECTED

For girls living in poverty or low-income communities, stressors such as food and housing insecurity, high crime, and poor school systems are all associated with poor mental health outcomes. Furthermore, these communities see higher rates of mental health and substance issues among parents, which can diminish their capacity for positive parenting practices and lead to child abuse and neglect. **Girls who are exposed to violence, abuse, or neglect are at greater risk of developing depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and anxiety.**

CONTRIBUTING FACTORS

The rise in mood disorders and mental health illnesses among teenagers and girls can be partially attributed to the increased use of digital media and electronic communications, which affects not only social interactions but also exposes teens to cyberbullying. The sexualization of girls has also played a role in the decline in girls' mental health. Exposure to sexualized images—in which value and self-worth are attributed to appearance rather than intelligence or other qualities—leads to low self-esteem, depression, and disordered eating for girls.

EFFECTS ON GIRLS' OUTCOMES

Untreated mental health issues can lead to serious and irreversible consequences for girls. Suicide remains the second leading cause of death in youth ages 10–24 in the U.S. and Canada, and the U.S. suicide rates among teen girls doubled from 2007 to 2015, reaching an all-time high of 5.1 deaths per 100,000. Girls with mental health issues may also miss school more, affecting their academic performance. Furthermore, teens with mental health issues are more likely to engage in substance abuse, exposing them to all of the negative consequences that behavior brings. Leadership, for girls, has to be grounded in a strong and healthy sense of self.

SOCIAL MEDIA

Girls are more likely than boys to be on social media: 50% of teen girls report they are online "almost constantly," compared to only 39% of teen boys. The risks are greater for girls, with a quarter of Canadian girls and 21% of U.S. girls reporting being victims of cyberbullying (compared with 14% and 7% of boys, respectively). For girls, social media usage has been linked to higher rates of depression, and recent evidence suggests that females are more likely than their male counterparts to internalize the harmful effects of cyberbullying and shaming.

The U.S. **suicide rates among teen girls doubled** from 2007 to 2015, reaching an all-time high of 5.1 deaths per 100,000.

THE VIEW FROM GIRLS INC.

Girls Inc. girls struggle with the stigma of mental health like other girls, giving of themselves, but reluctant to receive help: While **93% of Girls Inc. girls surveyed said they would offer help to a friend who was sad, stressed, or depressed,** only 71% said they would reach out to a friend for help if they felt the same way.

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STRONG

SUBSTANCE USE

OVERVIEW

Confidence and the ability to stay grounded in the face of social pressures are key for girls who lead. Without these two qualities, substance use may loom as a larger challenge for girls. Despite a **global increase in substance use by women and girls,** the literature on substance use—the use of illegal substances and repeated misuse of legal substances—still focuses primarily on boys and men. This lopsided focus ignores a troubling trend: that substance use disparities between men and women are narrowest among young people. **When it comes to substance use, girls are catching up and may soon surpass boys.**

CHANGING TRENDS

Overall, the percentage of female students who have used illicit drugs—cocaine, inhalants, heroin, methamphetamines, hallucinogens, or ecstasy—declined from 2007 (22.3%) to 2017 (13.3%). However, **girls in eighth and tenth grade drink more than boys of the same age, and they are more likely to use inhalants, stimulants, and cigarettes at a younger age.** Despite declines in teenage cigarette smoking, e-cigarettes pose a major threat to today's teens, as recent news of vaping-related illnesses has made clear. Rates of e-cigarette use doubled between 2017 and 2019. As of 2019, 25% of twelfth graders, 20% of tenth graders, and 9% of eighth graders report smoking e-cigarettes.

GIRLS AFFECTED

Girls with substance use disorders are more likely to have suffered from mood disorders, such as depression, or to have experienced physical or sexual abuse. Moreover, girls who have been sexually abused are more likely to use substances at higher and earlier rates. Generally speaking, substance use knows no bounds. It plagues all communities. Still, **ethnic background and socioeconomic status impacts what drugs girls use and when.** Latinx teens (54%) report having used an illicit drug at higher rates than Black teens (45%) and Caucasian teens (43%). Smoking in young adulthood correlates with lower childhood family socioeconomic status, while alcohol and marijuana use tracks with higher childhood family socioeconomic status. This trend exists in Canada, too, as 45.5% of British Columbia's Indigenous youths, who tend to have lower childhood family socioeconomic status, reported smoking. More troubling, Indigenous girls (48.5%) smoke earlier and more than Indigenous boys (42.7%).

LATINX TEENS	54%
BLACK TEENS	45%
WHITE TEENS	43%

Reported having used an illicit drug

CONTRIBUTING FACTORS

Peer pressure matters for girls, as they are more likely than boys to smoke, drink, and use drugs when they feel overly concerned with peer approval. Childhood trauma, especially sexual abuse, registers as a significant factor as to whether women will abuse alcohol or drugs later in life. **Girls who suffer from depression or lack confidence in their body image tend to use substances at higher rates. Further, studies list after-school care, self-perception, friends, family messaging on drugs, and strength of mother-daughter relationship as significant factors** in girls' use—or avoidance—of alcohol, inhalants, and prescription drugs.

EFFECTS ON GIRLS' OUTCOMES

Using drugs at a young age serves as a significant predictor of whether one will develop a substance use disorder later in life. The likelihood is greatest for those who begin using drugs in their early teens. For example, people who start drinking by age 14 are seven times more likely to develop alcohol abuse or dependence. Such statistics spell even more trouble for girls, as women tend to develop substance use disorders more quickly than men. Additionally, researchers have linked substance use during adolescence with negative outcomes like STDs, experiencing violence, mental health issues, and suicide risk. When girls develop substance use disorders, it can impair their brain development, leading to decreased memory or thinking ability. **Girls who postpone their first drink greatly diminish chances of alcohol addiction.** In comparison to boys and men, girls and women—both in the U.S. and in Canada—experience a greater stigma associated with substance abuse than do men. Such stigma prevents some women, especially mothers or pregnant women, from accessing treatment. **Girls and women can be ostracized by their family or community, subjected to violence, or coerced into sex work as a result of substance use disorders.**

Girls Inc. high school girls are using substances at **lower rates** than high school girls. Their **overall use is also declining.**

THE VIEW FROM GIRLS INC.

An outcomes survey of Girls Inc. girls (an internal survey conducted independently of the AIR study) found that, compared to U.S. high school girls nationwide, **Girls Inc. girls were more likely to abstain from substance use**—including alcohol, marijuana, prescription drugs, cigarettes, and e-cigarettes. Being able to say no to these pressures is a powerful step toward leadership for girls.

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TEEN PREGNANCY

OVERVIEW

Girls are only able to lead if they make thoughtful, healthy choices. From this perspective, teen pregnancy remains a major concern in girls' wellbeing. **For teen mothers, pregnancy and childrearing have significant and troubling effects on education and employment, as well as the child's educational readiness.** There's good news overall: From 1990 to 2013, the U.S. teen pregnancy rate fell by more than 63%, and by 2018, the teen birth rate had dropped to 17 births per 1,000, a 71% decrease from 1990. These are historic lows, and the decline can be seen across all states and racial/ethnic groups. Still, the United States has one of the highest teen birth rates among OECD nations, and the vast majority (77%) of these pregnancies are unplanned. Canada has historically had a lower teen birth rate compared with the U.S. and the country has also experienced an overall decline in teen births, with the rate dropping to 6.6 births per 1,000 in 2018.

CHANGING TRENDS

While it's hard to pinpoint the cause of the declining teen birth rate, trends suggest that fewer teens are engaging in sexual intercourse and more are using contraceptives. In 2011–2015, 42% of teen girls reported engaging in sexual intercourse. Alternatively, in 2017, 38% of high school girls reported engaging in sexual intercourse compared with 51% percent in 1988. Some observers speculate that greater social media use is leading to fewer face-to-face interactions between teens (and therefore less direct sexual contact). Among those girls who are sexually active, the number who used contraceptives during their first sexual encounter increased from 74.5% to 81% between 2002 and 2015, and use of the morning-after pill rose from 8% to 23% over that same time period. **Policy changes have made it easier to access contraception, but there are still disparities.** Rural teens are less likely to use contraceptives. So are girls who express concern about the confidentiality of accessing contraceptive services.

GIRLS AFFECTED

Although the U.S. teen birth rate has declined across almost all demographic categories, the 2017 birth rates for Latina and Black girls are still more than double the rates for non-Latina White and Asian girls, while Native American/Alaska Native girls had the highest birth rate. Birth rates also vary based on region: The U.S. teen birth rate is lowest in the Northeast and highest in the South, and is higher in rural counties compared with large urban counties (30.9 vs. 18.9). In Canada, similar regional disparities exist, with the most populous provinces—Ontario, Quebec, and British Columbia—having the lowest teen birth rate. Lastly, teens from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to become pregnant. Studies have shown that experiencing a range of childhood adversities—including abuse and poverty—contributes to the risk of teen pregnancy. Girls in foster care are especially vulnerable, and they are twice as likely to get pregnant compared with girls not in foster care.
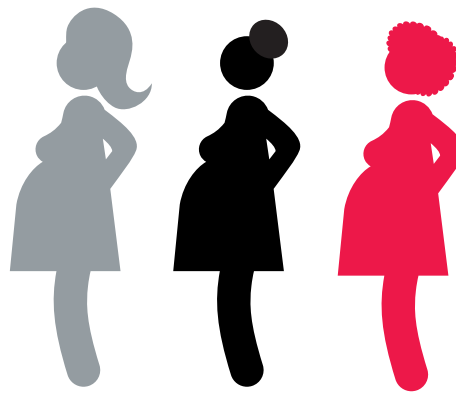
The 2017 birth rates for Latina and Black girls are still **more than double** the rates for non-Latina White and Asian girls, while Native American/Alaska Native girls had the highest birth rate.

CONTRIBUTING FACTORS

The reasons for teenage pregnancy are complex and numerous; however, unfavorable socioeconomic conditions at the family and community level play a role. A 2013 literature review of the social determinants of teen childbearing in the U.S. found that low income and low education levels of a girl's family, underemployment, neighborhood physical disorder (such as abandoned buildings, graffiti, and litter), and neighborhood income inequality were all linked to teen birth rates. **At the individual level, teens who engage in drug or alcohol use, lack future-oriented goals, and have low self-esteem are at greater risk for teen pregnancy.**

EFFECTS ON GIRLS' OUTCOMES

Teenage pregnancy and child rearing have immediate and long-term impacts on girls and their children, especially on educational outcomes. For teen mothers, graduating high school and obtaining a college degree becomes increasingly difficult. **Only 51% of teen mothers will earn a high school diploma by age 22 compared with their childless peers (89%), and 30% of girls who drop out of high school report that pregnancy or parenthood was a key factor in their decision. Obtaining a college degree also becomes more unlikely—only 1.5% of teen mothers will get a college degree by age 30.** Furthermore, there are significant effects on the children of teenage mothers. One study on children in the Canadian province of Manitoba showed that school readiness—as defined by social behaviors, numerical knowledge, ability to communicate, and other early childhood competencies—was highest among children for whom neither their mother or grandmother was an adolescent mother. **Among kindergarten-age kids born to adolescent mothers, 41% were deemed not ready for school.**

THE VIEW FROM GIRLS INC.

The **declining teen birth rate is a reason for optimism**, and it is important to build on the approaches that have helped to reduce it significantly in some populations. When girls have access to the kind of mentoring and education that Girls Inc. provides—not just about pregnancy prevention but about choosing healthy sexuality and cultivating personal potential—they understand better **how to achieve ambitious academic and personal goals,** becoming leaders in many aspects of their lives.

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EDUCATIONAL ACHIEVEMENT

OVERVIEW

Education is an area in which girls are already taking the lead. On a number of measures, **girls continue to outperform boys in school.** A recent meta-analysis found that girls have earned better grades than boys across all subjects for decades. Compared with boys, **girls are less likely to repeat a grade and are more likely to like school and say good grades are important. They also graduate from high school at higher rates and are more likely to attend college when compared with boys.** In 2017, 71.7% of young women in the U.S. who had recently graduated from high school were enrolled in a two- or four-year college, compared with 61.1 % of men. However, **racial and socioeconomic disparities in girls' educational achievement persist.**

GIRLS AFFECTED

Despite girls' overall academic success, low-income girls and girls of color continue to face barriers. **Girls of color remain more likely to attend underresourced schools and face harsher discipline at school, which affects their academic performance. They are also more likely than boys and White girls to miss school due to safety concerns.** In 2017, 7.1% of all girls reported missing school because of safety concerns—but 9.5% of Black girls and 9.3% of Latina girls said they had missed school for such reasons. Absenteeism, in turn, has been linked to a range of negative educational outcomes.

Across all income categories, Latinx and Black children are also more likely to live in households without high-speed Internet compared with their White peers, which affects their ability to complete homework. In a 2018 survey, **25% of Black teenagers reported that they were unable to complete homework due to lack of Internet at home,** and 21% of Black teens reported having to occasionally use public Wi-Fi to complete their homework.

CONTRIBUTING FACTORS

There is significant research—biological, sociological, psychological, and more—on gender differences in educational achievement. Much of the research has focused on traits that position girls for success in the school environment. Researchers have found that girls are better at self-regulation. In the school context, this means **girls are better at demonstrating behaviors like raising their hands, paying attention, and listening to instructions. They are also better at self-discipline, and they prioritize completing homework and persisting at assignments, which helps explain better grades.**

However, girls also face a number of biases early in their education that negatively affect their educational performance and career choices. In one study, researchers found that **among girls and boys who behave and perform similarly, elementary school teachers rated the math skills of boys higher. Starting at age 6, girls were less likely than boys to believe that other girls are "really, really smart" and they were more likely to shy away from activities that were deemed appropriate for "really, really smart" children.** Encountering these biases at an early age can make a difference in the type of classes and careers girls go into and can steer girls away from "traditional male" fields like math.

For girls overall, the news about educational achievement and academic promise is already quite good, barring internalized bias: girls clearly outperform boys at school. Now it is time to address the lingering racism, gender bias, lack of confidence, and absenteeism that disproportionately affect some girls, so that girls of all backgrounds succeed.

THE VIEW FROM GIRLS INC.

Girls Inc. girls are significantly **more likely than girls in a control group to attend school and to be engaged in school,** according to AIR. In schools where girls can sometimes face challenges, the Girls Inc. pro-girl, all-girl environment—as well as Girls Inc. mentoring—gives girls a safe space to lead, academically and socially.

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STEM ENGAGEMENT

OVERVIEW

A solid foundation in elementary and secondary math and science is critical for success in post-secondary education, as well as in careers and leadership roles related to science, technology, engineering, and mathematics, or STEM. **Girls have made gains in these fields in recent years, and they continue to perform academically on par with their male counterparts in the subjects of math and science.** But in spite of their obvious talents, they are underrepresented in STEM majors in college as well as in STEM-related careers.

DOWNWARD TRENDS

In their K–12 years, girls and boys take math and science courses at roughly the same rates. While historically boys have outperformed girls in math, the gap between girls' and boys' performance on math and science assessments is closing. Many state and national test scores show no or only slight differences in performance that favor boys. However, **on a 2018 national standardized test that assesses proficiency in technology and engineering, girls scored higher than boys in every category.** Girls should be well positioned for success in these fields, but sadly, this is not the case. Despite their achievements, by the time they enter high school, fewer girls take STEM-related advanced math and science courses. They are less confident in their math and science skills. Among girls in elementary school, 81% believe they are good at math and science, but this number drops to 67% by high school, and the trend continues downward.

Once in college, women are less likely to major in STEM. While 45% of girls report they are considering a career in math or science, only 35% of women graduate with a bachelor's degree in a STEM field. Furthermore, while there has been an increasing amount of focus in recent years on reducing the gender disparity in STEM, some fields still continue to see a decline in female representation. In 1984, women represented 37.1% of all computer science degrees, but by 2015 this number fell to 18%.

GIRLS AFFECTED

There is unequal access to math and science courses, and girls of color and low-income girls are particularly affected. One study found that Native American girls are most likely to attend high schools without key math and science courses. For these girls, 38.6% had no access to a chemistry class or calculus class, and 30.1% had no access to a physics class. For Black girls, 28% did not have access to chemistry classes, 28.4% did not have access to calculus, and 18.6% did not have access to physics in high school. Furthermore, girls attending high-minority and high-poverty schools have less access to math and science courses. Of schools with the highest concentration of Black and Latinx students, one-quarter did not offer Algebra 2 and one-third did not offer chemistry. High-minority schools, those with over 75% minority enrollment, are also less likely to be staffed by certified teachers. In these schools, only 84% of teachers are certified in math, compared with 92% of teachers at schools with low minority enrollment.

Research has consistently shown that social class is one of the most significant predictors of educational success, and social class is a predictor of whether students will take advanced math and science classes. Substantial demographic disparities exist: 56% of students from the bottom SES quintile were taking Algebra 2 or higher, compared to 83% of students from the top SES quintile.

CONTRIBUTING FACTORS

Girls face a number of biases about their abilities, especially in math and science, and they encounter these biases at an early age. More than just a social challenge, these biases may actually decrease their likelihood of going into STEM. A recent study of 6,000 girls and young women across the U.S. also shed light on attitudes towards STEM. In this study, researchers found that many girls have a hard time picturing themselves in STEM roles. Perhaps more than in other instances, here the lack of female role models is a real issue: Compared with girls who don't know a woman in STEM, girls who know a woman in STEM report feeling more powerful while doing STEM (61% vs. 44%). More of these girls know how to pursue a STEM career (74% vs. 51%), and more of them understand how STEM is relevant and know of STEM jobs (73% vs. 53%).

Another possible setback for girls is that they do not view STEM as a creative field: 91% of girls ages 5–12 describe themselves as creative, and an interest in STEM might not align with their self-perception.

VIDEO GAMES & STEM

So how might these ingrained perceptions be usefully challenged? Video games and game design may be an important pathway for girls to get involved in STEM, as 83% of girls report playing video games. A recent study linked heavy gaming among girls with a greater likelihood of studying STEM during the undergraduate years, and other studies have shown that creating video games can help kids learn STEM skills. However, girls remain underrepresented among video game characters, and they are often depicted in sexual ways, not as powerful characters. A look at 126 games that were featured at a prominent gaming event in 2019 found that only 5% of video games featured a female protagonist. It would not be surprising for girls to conclude that they are not welcome as contributors in the gaming and computing world.

EFFECTS ON GIRLS' OUTCOMES

These are trends well worth reversing, for obvious reasons. Students who take advanced STEM courses in high school and perform well are more likely to major in a STEM degree in college. STEM fields are among the highest paying, and with women being the primary earners for 40% of U.S. households with children, being employed in a STEM field can help set up women—and their families—for economic success.

THE VIEW FROM GIRLS INC.

Girls Inc. girls **scored higher on standardized math tests** than their peers and were more likely than their peers to believe they **could handle harder math or science content,** to say they were **curious about science, computers, or technology** or to want to **have a computer or science job in the future.**

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GRADUATION RATES

OVERVIEW

Personal, professional, and social leadership roles for women today generally assume successful completion of at least a high school education. Across a number of different performance indicators, the high school graduation rate for all students is improving—and more girls than boys graduate on time. Girls are also less likely to be high school dropouts: perhaps because they have high educational and career aspirations. The majority of girls report that they are somewhat or very interested in four-year college (86%) and graduate school (67%). In a survey of 15-year-olds in the U.S., 73% of girls reported that they expected to work in managerial, professional, or technical jobs, compared with 53% of boys. All of this is good news, especially for girls.

In 2012–2013, the average freshman graduation rate, which estimates the percent of high school students who graduate on time, was 85.2% for females and 78.8% for males. In 2016, the status dropout rate, defined as the percentage of students ages 16–24 who have not earned a high school credential or are not currently enrolled in school, was 5.1% for females compared with 7.1% for males.

The average freshman graduation rate has risen steadily over the years, from 71% in 1995–1996 to 81.9% in 2012–2013. From 1976 to 2016, the status dropout rates declined from 14.1% to 6.1%, with the dropout rate decreasing more for girls than boys. In 1976, the dropout rate was 14.1% and 14.2% for males and females, respectively. By 2016, that number had decreased to 7.1% for males and 5.1% for females. Still, in 2016 there were around 2.3 million dropouts in the U.S. between ages 16 and 24.

But the bad news is that **there are still significant disparities—some girls are more likely than others to drop out of school.** Students from low-income families are three times more likely to drop out of high school. Girls in foster care are at a higher risk of not graduating from high school, as are girls who are homeless, involved in the juvenile justice system, or pregnant. Compared with White girls, a higher percentage of Black and Latina girls are more likely to be held back a grade, which negatively affects their chances of graduating from high school. In addition, many girls do not feel prepared for college. While 91% of girls report wanting help applying to college, less than half (49%) of girls report that someone at their school is, in fact, helping them explore their educational plans for after high school.

Average on-time
graduation rates

85.2%

78.8%

CONTRIBUTING FACTORS

There are a number of factors that influence whether or not a girl will graduate from high school, and researchers have classified these into "pull-out factors" and "push-out factors." Pull-out factors take into account the larger context and non-school aspects affecting a girl's life. Among these factors, researchers have found that girls are more likely than boys to drop out to focus on taking care of their family, including younger siblings and/or older relatives as well as their own children. Among girls, Latinas were the most likely to leave school for this reason.

Push-out factors refer to the school-specific factors that contribute to students dropping out of school, including harsh school policies and unwelcoming environments. Many of these factors disproportionately affect girls of color, including suspension and expulsion. Compared with White girls, Black girls are five and a half times as likely to be suspended, and Native American girls are three times as likely. In the Midwest, this number spikes even higher: In those states, Black girls are ten times as likely to be suspended, compared with White girls.

EFFECTS ON GIRLS' OUTCOMES

Girls who drop out of high school are at greater risk for economic insecurity throughout their lives. Women ages 25–54 who dropped out of high school are 2.3 times more likely to be unemployed compared with women who graduated. Those who are employed earn on average $6,000 less annually than women with a high school diploma. In 2016, full-time workers ages 25–34 who did not graduate high school earned a median income of $21,900 compared with a median income of $28,000 for those who graduated high school. As the population ages, the labor force in some of the most advanced economies is shrinking, but research shows that as more women participate in the workforce, they not only help offset this trend, but also improve finances at the level of both households, through their wages, and the national economy.

THE VIEW FROM GIRLS INC.

Education is an area in which girls generally have the wind at their backs; they are better positioned than boys to complete high school and pursue postsecondary education. While disproportionate challenges remain for some groups of girls, there are ways to counteract these forces. The AIR research shows that Girls Inc. girls **have better attendance rates** than their counterparts, are **more likely to be engaged in school,** and are **better prepared for life after high school.** Particularly when exposed to programming that emphasizes college readiness, girls have all the necessary tools to thrive and lead.

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JUVENILE JUSTICE

OVERVIEW

Girls who are at risk in other ways also are at risk of entering the juvenile justice system. They are typically arrested and detained for non-violent and non-weapons-related offenses. In the U.S., three-quarters of these cases are dismissed or receive informal sanctions, referral for service, or probation. Girls are overrepresented in certain arrest categories, including prostitution—often a marker of trafficking—and girls of color and LGBTQ girls are disproportionately represented in the juvenile justice system. It requires tremendous courage and self-efficacy to make choices that lead down more promising paths.

CHANGING TRENDS

Girls' share in the overall U.S. juvenile justice system is growing. In 1996 the number of teens in the U.S. juvenile justice system reached an all-time high, with 2.7 million arrests. By 2017 that number had fallen by 70%—but declines have been greater for boys. Arrests of girls have been on the rise since 1980, from 18% of all teen arrests then to 29% in 2017. Between 1992 and 2013, the share of girls arrested increased by 45%. The proportion of girls in probation and placement also increased over this time frame.

Despite this increased involvement in the system, studies show that there has not been a significant change in girls' behavior; in other words, girls today are not more violent nor are they engaging in more criminal activity than in the past. Instead, girls are more likely to be detained for minor offenses, such as status offenses—defined as offenses that would not be considered a crime if committed by an adult, such as missing curfew or running away from home—and violations of probation.
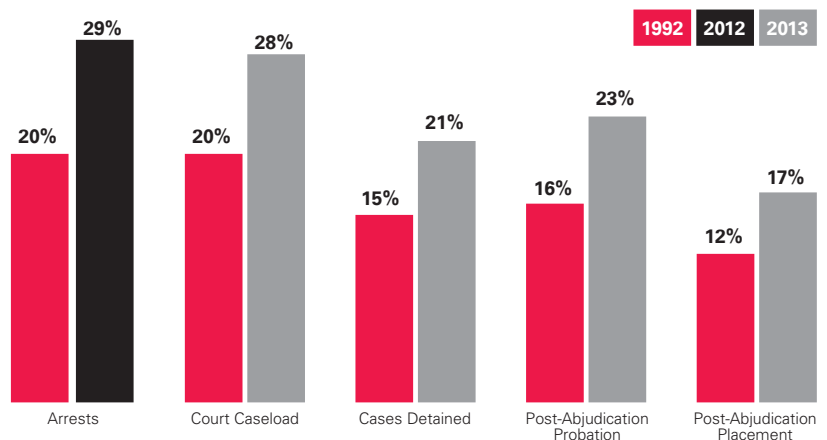
GIRLS AFFECTED

Girls of color are disproportionately represented in the juvenile justice system. While Black girls make up 14% of the under-18 population, they represent 33% of girls in the system. Girls who identify as LGBTQ+ are also overrepresented and make up nearly 40% of girls in the system.

Many of the girls in the juvenile justice system have been victims of sexual abuse and violence. Some 42% of girls in custody report being the victim of physical abuse, while 31% reported past sexual abuse. Compared with boys, girls in the juvenile justice system are 4.4 times more likely to have been sexually abused.

> **In 2013, 25% of boys were detained for status offenses, while 37% of girls were detained on such charges. Greater enforcement of these non-serious offenses has translated into higher involvement in the juvenile justice system for females.**

Girls Increasing Share of the Juvenile Justice System, 1992 to 2012/2013

	1992	2012	2013
Arrests	20%	29%	
Court Caseload	20%		28%
Cases Detained	15%		21%
Post-Abjudication Probation	16%		23%
Post-Abjudication Placement	12%		17%

CONTRIBUTING FACTORS

A number of factors place girls at risk of entering the U.S. juvenile justice system. "*Beyond the Walls*," a recent report by Rights4Girls and the Georgetown Juvenile Justice Initiative, discusses six of the most common pathways that lead to girls' involvement in the juvenile justice system:

1. **The Abuse to Prison Pipeline:** Sexual abuse has been shown to be a primary predictor for girls' involvement in the juvenile justice system. For example, girls are likely to enter the system for offenses that are related to being victims of abuse, such as running away from home.

2. **Criminalization of Girls for Status Offenses:** Girls are disproportionately arrested for non-violent crimes, with girls representing more than 50% of runaway arrests. Girls are also frequently arrested for truancy and prostitution. Runaway behavior, truancy, and prostitution are all indicators of abuse and exploitation.

3. **Crossover—From Child Welfare to Juvenile Justice:** Girls represent 33% to 50% of crossover youth, a term used to refer to the passage of children from the welfare system into the juvenile justice system and vice-versa. Child welfare agencies may refer youth in their care to the courts if girls are demonstrating problematic behavior.

4. **Domestic Violence and Mandatory Arrest Policies:** Misbehavior in girls is commonly linked to abuse within the home. Changes in mandatory arrest policies have meant that girls are increasingly arrested for conflicts within their homes.

5. **School Push-out:** Girls, especially girls of color, are often targets of school disciplinary actions. Black girls are 5.5 times more likely to be suspended from school compared with white girls, while American Indian and Alaskan Native girls are three times more likely. Being suspended places girls at greater risk of juvenile justice involvement.

6. **Poverty and Housing Instability:** Poverty and housing instability are risk factors for increased contact with the juvenile justice system. Girls might engage in survival behaviors, like sleeping in public places (loitering) or stealing to pay for food (theft), that lead to justice involvement.

GIRLS IN CANADA

The overall youth crime rate in Canada dropped 42% between 2000 and 2014.

Of youth accused in criminal offenses, 28% were girls. Girls made up the majority of those accused of prostitution, as well as more than 35% of those charged with assault, criminal harassment, and disturbing the peace.

Compared with boys, girls were less likely to be charged for both violent and non-violent offenses. They are more likely to be cleared without charge, with a warning or caution.

EFFECTS ON GIRLS' OUTCOMES

Involvement with the juvenile justice system can have long-term, harmful consequences for girls. In court, the practice of shackling during courtroom proceedings can re-traumatize girls who have suffered from past physical or sexual abuse and can lead to low self-esteem. Once out of the system, previously incarcerated girls are five times more likely to die by age 29 compared with girls who had not been incarcerated. Lastly, court involvement and incarceration of youth may actually increase the risk of future delinquent behavior and involvement in the adult justice system, setting girls up to repeat many of these experiences as adults. Having the necessary independence and clarity to avoid these traps is crucial for girls—especially low-income girls and girls of color.

THE VIEW FROM GIRLS INC.

According to the AIR research, Girls Inc. girls are **79% less likely than other girls** in similar settings to be involved with the juvenile justice system.

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HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS—HARASSMENT

OVERVIEW

Forming healthy and safe relationships with peers, romantic partners, parents, and other family members is critical for girls' overall health and well-being, as well as for their development as leaders. Too many girls are still victims of sexual harassment— unwelcome sexual advances, sexual comments (including comments about sexual orientation), unwanted touching, and coercion.

CHANGING TRENDS

In a given school year, girls are more likely than boys to be the target of sexual harassment and to experience this harassment both in person and digitally via text messages, email, and web postings. This gender gap widens with age. By Twelfth grade, 62% of girls and 39% of boys report they experienced sexual harassment during the school year. **The most common form of harassment experienced by girls in the U.S. and Canada includes unwelcome sexual jokes, comments, or gestures.** U.S. victims of sexual harassment identified boys as the main perpetrator (66% compared with 19% reporting girls as the main perpetrator, and 11% saying both girls and boys were perpetrators).

GIRLS AFFECTED

Girls who are deemed "too sexual" are at heightened risk of sexual harassment. So are girls who reach puberty earlier. In one survey, 58% of middle and high school students said that girls with more developed bodies were either likely or very likely to be sexually harassed at school, while 41% of students reported that girls who are considered pretty were likely to be harassed.

Research also shows that **students from low- or moderate-income homes are more likely than more privileged students to report that sexual harassment had had a negative impact on them, and suggests that students of color may be affected more by harassment than their white peers.** Latinx students were more like to stay home from school due to sexual harassment compared with White students. Black students were more likely than their White peers to report that they had stopped doing a sport or activity and found it hard to study due to sexual harassment.

CONTRIBUTING FACTORS

For many students, sexual harassment is not seen as a big deal. Among those who reported sexually harassing other students, 44% claimed that sexual harassment was "just part of school life / no big deal," while 39% reported that they thought it was funny. Furthermore, many girls do not report incidents of harassment, although girls are more comfortable than boys in discussing incidents of harassment with friends and family.

EFFECTS ON GIRLS' OUTCOMES

Overall, seven out of eight students who experienced sexual harassment said it had a negative effect on them, and girls were more likely than boys to report that they had been negatively affected by sexual harassment. Girls were more likely than boys to say that sexual harassment left them wanting not to go to school, having a hard time studying, and having issues with sleeping.

Furthermore, sexual harassment is a risk factor for other psychological problems in teens. One longitudinal study of Canadian teens found sexual harassment victimization was associated with an elevated risk for thoughts of suicide, self-harm, maladaptive dieting, early dating, substance use, and feeling unsafe at school.

THE VIEW FROM GIRLS INC.

The #GirlsToo campaign, launched in October 2018, aims to create a culture where girls and all young people grow up safe, respected, and valued. #GirlsToo **raises awareness of the problem of sexual harassment and violence among youth, with actions aimed at shifting the norms and stereotypes** that fuel these behaviors.

> " **#GirlsToo is important to me because I believe that every girl in the world should have the right to feel safe anywhere they go.** "
>
> Harmonii, 15

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HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS—SEXUAL ABUSE

OVERVIEW

Physical safety in relationships with others is not only a basic need, but a human right—a right of girls. Rape and sexual abuse remain all too common, with long-lasting effects on girls' physical and mental health, as well as educational outcomes. Despite their prevalence, incidents of sexual assault are among the most underreported crimes. The self-confidence that girls need to lead can be seriously undermined by such incidents. On the other hand, self-confidence can help strengthen a girl's ability to confront, and even avoid, some threats of personal harm.

CHANGING TRENDS

Girls make up 82% of all sexual abuse victims under age 18. Additionally, girls in U.S. high schools are more likely than boys to have been forced to have sex (11.3% vs. 3.5%).

Girls experience sexual assault by other young people as well as adults, and the perpetrators of sexual abuse are often acquaintances or family members of the victim. Up to 90% of victims know their abusers. While the majority of sexual abuse occurs in a place of residence, schools are increasingly becoming the site of sexual assault. In a survey of students across Canada, 15% of girls reported that they had been sexually assaulted by another student, including being forced to touch someone or perform oral sex, and a quarter of girls reported being inappropriately touched at school.

An estimated
1 IN 4 GIRLS
in the U.S. will be victims of sexual abuse or assault by the time they turn 18.

Girls are more likely to be sexually abused than boys.

GIRLS AFFECTED

Girls of color and LGBTQ+ girls are disproportionately affected by sexual violence and abuse. Black children have almost twice the risk of sexual abuse compared with white children, and studies have found that 40% to 60% of Black girls experience sexual assault by the time they reach 18. In a survey of girls ages 14 to 18, 21% of girls reported that they have been kissed or touched without their consent, with this figure rising to 38% for LGBTQ girls. In this same survey, 6% of girls reported being forced to have sex when they did not want to, with the rate rising to 15% for LGBTQ girls and 11% for Native American girls. In Canada, Aboriginal women are more likely to report they were sexually assaulted compared with non-Aboriginal women. Among young Aboriginal women, 22% reported being sexually assaulted.

CONTRIBUTING FACTORS

There are a number of factors that heighten or reduce the risk of sexual abuse. Children are at heightened risk of sexual abuse when they live with a single parent or stepparents, and **children living with a single parent who has a live-in partner are 20 times more likely to be sexually abused compared with children living with both biological parents.** Conversely, children are at reduced risk for sexual abuse when they live with two married biological parents. Sexual abuse perpetrators have reported that they often look for quiet, and troubled, and lonely children from single-parent and/or disrupted households.

EFFECTS ON GIRLS' OUTCOMES

Victims of sexual abuse—who, again, are four times as likely to be girls as boys—are more likely to develop post-traumatic stress disorder, experience depression or anxiety, and attempt suicide. Victims of sexual abuse also struggle to get to school or, once there, to pay attention. One study found that 68% of victims of sexual abuse had difficulty concentrating on schoolwork, while another 30% reported that they had stayed home from school because of safety concerns. It is not always possible for young women to avoid incidents of sexual assault, and such incidents are never their fault. There is strength for girls, however, in knowing that they have options and advocates who can help them find the confidence and courage to seek support.

EXPERIENCES OF SURVIVORS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE	Girls Overall	Survivors of Sexual Violence
Have felt nervous, anxious, or on edge	78%	91%
Have felt down, depressed, or hopeless	66%	86%
Have had repeated memories, thoughts, or images of a stressful experience	49%	82%
Have had trouble concentrating and staying focused in school	46%	68%
Have missed 15 days or more of school in a school year	25%	43%
Have been absent from school because felt unsafe at school or on their way to school	14%	30%
Have been in a physical fight at school	12%	25%
Have experienced exclusionary discipline	11%	25%

THE VIEW FROM GIRLS INC.

Girls Inc. helps girls understand that they have a voice, identify healthy and unhealthy relationships, and learn about healthy sexuality at an age-appropriate level. Girls build **physical self-defense skills, talk about violence** and **identify warning signs** of potential harm, and **develop strategies for improving their personal safety** and that of others, all in a safe environment. Girls are also encouraged to learn to trust their inner voices and intuition. We emphasize that **gender-based violence is a cultural and societal issue for which girls and women are not to be blamed** and that real change requires community- and society-level solutions, for which we all must work together.

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BOLD

LEADERSHIP

CONTEXT

Girls today play important leadership roles within their families, schools, and communities, and they rightly aspire to be leaders as adults. For today's girls, leadership is defined as bringing people together, standing up for their values and beliefs, and working to change the world for the better. However, there are many barriers that prevent girls from achieving their leadership goals, including gender bias, lack of confidence, and a fear of being perceived negatively.

DIFFERENCES AMONG GIRLS

The majority of girls see themselves as leaders and desire to be leaders, although there are disparities based on race/ethnicity. 75% of Black, 72% of Latina, 66% of Asian-American, and 56% of White girls see themselves as leaders. Meanwhile the desire to be a leader is highest among Asian American (59%), Black (53%), and Latina (50%) girls and lowest among Caucasian girls (34%). Certain subsets of girls face unique challenges in achieving these leadership ambitions. For Black girls, leadership traits like assertiveness can place them at heightened risk for school discipline. Researchers have found that Black girls are more likely to be punished for challenging stereotypical feminine behavior, which could be as simple as being candid or assertive.

75% of Black,
72% of Latina,
66% of Asian-American,
and **56%** of White girls see
themselves as leaders.

CONTRIBUTING FACTORS

Girls face a number of biases that affect their leadership aspirations—both from adults as well as from their peers. One study of almost 20,000 middle and high school students in Canada and the U.S. found that 23% of girls and 40% of boys preferred male political leaders over female political leaders. Mothers of these students were also more likely to support student councils led by boys than councils led by girls. Self-confidence is an important component of leadership, and in studies of both parents and girls, it has been identified as a key barrier to girls' pursuing more leadership opportunities. Girls' confidence tends to decline throughout the school years, with 87% of 5th grade girls saying they're confident while only 60% of 9th grade girls report being confident. **Furthermore, girls who are less confident are less likely to voice their opinions or express disagreement.** Lastly, a fear of being perceived negatively affects girls' behavior. While 61% of girls say they like to be in charge, almost half of girls (46%) report not speaking their minds or disagreeing with others because they want to be seen as likeable. Girls are too often afraid of being seen as "too bossy" and thus concerned about taking on leadership, although the good news is that this sentiment is less pronounced for girls in high school than for girls in elementary school.

LEADERSHIP

In a test to uncover implicit leadership biases among U.S. and Canadian students, researchers asked students if they would be in favor of giving more power to their student council depending on the ethnicity, race, and gender of its leaders. Students were least likely to support giving more power to a student council when it was led by White girls and most likely to support giving power to a student council when it was led by White boys. The findings also show that White girls are also biased against other White girls; their average level of support was higher for student councils led by White boys compared with White girls.

While 61% of girls say they like to be in charge, almost half of girls (46%) report not speaking their minds or disagreeing with others because they want to be seen as likeable.

EFFECTS ON GIRLS' OUTCOMES

There is reason to be optimistic about changing this trend: **Encouraging girls to become leaders has a pronounced effect on their leadership aspirations in the future.** The representation of women in top leadership is also important. It will come as no surprise that women are the best role models and sources of inspiration for girls. While there are more women today in key leadership positions than ever before, there still exists a pervasive gender gap in top leadership, and an even larger gap in the representation of women of color. Among Fortune 500 companies, only 33 CEOs (6.6%) are women. Only 1 of these women is a woman of color. In Congress, women make up 23.6% of the House of Representatives and 25% of the Senate.

A KPMG study found that women who were encouraged to be leaders while growing up were more likely to aspire to be the leader of a company (74% vs. 48%) or on the board of a company (66% vs. 39%) compared with those who were not encouraged to be a leader as girls.

THE VIEW FROM GIRLS INC.

AIR reports that Girls Inc. girls are more likely than other girls **to see themselves as leaders, with the skills and capabilities of influencing and improving their local communities.** Girls Inc. girls are also more likely **to have positive relationships with adults, and see them as allies.** The kind of mentoring, modeling, and encouragement provided through research-based Girls Inc. programming shows girls how to become confident, prepared, active leaders.

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WHAT'S NEXT?

Plenty of work remains to erase the inequities that prevent girls from reaching their full potential as successful adults and leaders. By focusing on proven strategies and effective advocacy, organizations like Girls Inc. will play a crucial role in shaping whether and how our society rises to that challenge in the coming decade.

Key to this is a multi-layered understanding of girls and the issues that they face, both at the demographic and the more personal, individual level. Having established itself locally, regionally, and nationally, and having had its outcomes independently evaluated, Girls Inc. is now ideally positioned to address the policy, implementation, and personal challenges that await girls. We inspire them to take charge of their futures and equip them with the skills and tools to achieve their goals. It's a daunting task, in this environment, but not at all an insurmountable one.

To leverage the momentum of this moment, **we must act, and we must act now.**

- **Girls must lead.** The world needs leaders to guide nations through a challenging political and cultural time—and our girls need more examples and role models to look up to in charting their course. Girls Inc. has the ability to use its direct services and advocacy platform to inspire and prepare new generations of leaders—national, regional, and local.
- **We mean *all* girls.** Even these succinct reviews of current data make it plain that girls, particularly girls of color and girls from families with low socioeconomic status, need tools and opportunities to realize their tremendous potential.
- **It's time for change.** It becomes obvious fairly quickly that many of the approaches of the past are outdated, in part because they have focused on fixing girls rather than inspiring them.
- **And that change needs to come from many angles.** The issues facing girls are multifaceted and interconnected. Taking a holistic and multidimensional view of girls is critical to understanding the barriers to their success and strategizing how to overcome them. An approach that features a number of elements—including mentorship, policy work, school-level interventions, and the like—will be critical for moving the needle on these issues.

Girls from all backgrounds have this in common: They start with talent and confidence to spare. But as they repeatedly confront ingrained biases, inequitable social situations, and outright abuse— all of which place them at a disadvantage—that confidence is slowly (and sometimes quickly) eroded. Whatever the setbacks girls experience, their potential remains unchanged, and the right interventions can reverse even the most pernicious damage.

Pro-girl, all-girl environments, strong mentorship, and proven, research-based programming are the place to start creating these kinds of supports for girls. Recognizing that yesterday's interventions are not serving today's girls fully, Girls Inc. recommends that leaders develop a new set of policy initiatives, structures, and best practices that respond to the unique challenges that girls now face. Girls Inc. and like-minded organizations can use their expertise to ensure that girls not only sustain their healthy confidence, but also become lifelong leaders.

APPENDIX

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POSITIVE PERFORMANCE MEASURES

Girls Inc. girls outperform their peers in the following areas:

ACADEMIC RECORD OUTCOMES

1. Standardized English/Language Arts Test Scores
2. Standardized Math Test Scores
3. School Attendance
4. Suspensions from School

STRONG OUTCOMES

1. Exercise regularly
2. Play on a sports team
3. Happy with my body

SMART OUTCOMES

1. Science is fun
2. Science confidence
3. Understand science
4. Enjoy seeing how things are made
5. Curious about science
6. Want a science job
7. Excited about science
8. Enjoy science games
9. Math is fun
10. Math confidence
11. Reading confidence
12. Postsecondary readiness
13. School engagement

BOLD OUTCOMES

1. Leadership
2. Positive relationship with adults
3. Stands up for fairness and beliefs
4. Civic efficacy

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Kelsey King - Girls Inc. Alumna

ABOUT GIRLS INC.

Girls Inc. inspires all girls to be strong, smart, and bold through direct service and advocacy. Our comprehensive approach to whole girl development equips girls to navigate gender, economic, and social barriers and grow up healthy, educated, and independent. These positive outcomes are achieved through mentoring relationships, girls-only safe spaces, and research-based programming. Informed by girls and their families, we also advocate for legislation and policies to increase opportunities for all girls. Join us at girlsinc.org.

girls inc.

Inspiring all girls
to be strong,
smart, and bold

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