Girls@theMargin
NATIONAL ALLIANCE

ISSUE BRIEF

GIRLS AND GENDER-EXPANSIVE YOUTH AND COVID-19

INTRODUCTION

While the COVID-19 pandemic is having far-reaching impacts on people across the United States, its impacts are particularly acute for the most vulnerable who also experience high levels of systemic oppression and inequality. Marginalized young women and girls and gender-expansive youth are one such population. Historically, their experiences were rendered invisible and their needs overlooked. This has largely proven to be true during the COVID-19 pandemic--even though this crisis is exacerbating their needs and the challenges they face--causing the chasm between the marginalized and privileged to grow wider. In addition, vulnerable communities are forced to face the pandemic on top of many pressing issues rooted in oppressive systems and exclusionary practices. Therefore, it is critical that reform efforts note the overlapping impacts that these issues have on marginalized girls and gender expansive young people--particularly girls and gender expansive young people of color--and directly address these in COVID-19 related responses.

Girls at the Margin National Alliance (G@TM) uses the term “marginalized” not to describe girls and gender-expansive young people, but to call attention to their treatment by decision makers, communities, families, and the systems charged with their care. Many are survivors of child sexual, physical, and emotional abuse and/or persistent neglect. Many grow up in homes marked by domestic violence and other forms of childhood adversity. These challenges persist as they continue to experience violence, including becoming victims of sex trafficking. Many live in poverty as young adults, among them young mothers with limited resources. As a result of childhood trauma, these young people may also become involved in foster care, juvenile justice, mental health, and multiple other systems, where they are often denied safe and supportive services appropriate to their needs. They are disproportionately young women and gender-expansive youth of color, identify as LGBQ, and/or are girls with disabilities.

This issue brief highlights the needs of girls and gender-expansive young people at the margins during the COVID crisis. It is based on surveys and other feedback from girl-serving organizations connected to the Girls at the Margin National Alliance (G@TM) collected in April, along with input from the G@TM Steering Committee. As such, it is not intended to serve as a comprehensive analysis of the issues impacting girls and gender-expansive youth during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially as the pandemic and its repercussions continue to evolve. Rather, it is intended to illuminate conversations that confront the disparate and severe impact of this health and economic crisis on girls, gender-expansive youth, their families, the communities in which they live, and the organizations that work with and alongside them. While some of the issues described herein may be applicable to a broader population of youth, their inclusion draws attention to the layered effects of experiencing COVID-related issues, along with continued marginalization. Though it is still too early to understand the full effects of COVID-19 on this group of young people, we recognize that current economic conditions created by this pandemic will result in new and harsher realities in the short and long term, including increasing housing insecurity and rates of sex trafficking to name just a couple of alarming likelihoods.

We welcome thoughts, feedback, and additional resources to expand this living document and encourage you to submit these to **cherice@rights4girls.org** and **samantha@nationalcrittenton.org**.

- NOTE -

Additional information is necessary to fully understand the scope and degree to which girls and gender-expansive youth are impacted by this pandemic, including the collection and disaggregation of data in all reporting by race, ethnicity, gender identity - at minimum - and additional identities when available. Data collection efforts need to be expanded to include this information where it is not currently a reporting requirement, as well as to include sexual orientation, disability, age, class and other important demographic information needed to better understand the experiences of girls and gender-expansive youth during the COVID-19 pandemic, and ensure the needs of our most marginalized young people are centered in just policy advocacy and reforms. Additionally, girls and gender-expansive young people should be consulted directly in order to learn more about the impacts of this pandemic, as well as to guide responsive efforts.

VIOLENCE AGAINST GIRLS AND GENDER-EXPANSIVE YOUNG PEOPLE

The current health crisis is **exacerbating conditions** (e.g. increased time at home with abusers, job loss and poverty, disconnection from school and safe spaces) that put girls at risk of in- and out-of-home violence. Service providers are seeing alarming increases across the **spectrum** of gender-based violence, with **RAINN reporting** that as of March 2020 the majority of sexual abuse reports come from young people under age 18. In addition, girls and youth of color are the targets of racially motivated violence. Black and Brown youth are experiencing violence as a result of overpolicing by government and community actors and, in particular, Asian American youth are experiencing violence due to racist tropes about the origin and spread of the virus. Girls, gender-expansive youth, providers, and advocates report:

- More abuse and sexual assault as a result of girls being trapped at home with their abusers;
- Increased rates of family conflict and domestic violence that is physical and verbal in nature;
- Fewer opportunities to intervene in potentially unsafe situations impacting girls and gender-expansive youth, including less interaction with adults who might otherwise observe and report concerns of abuse and fewer youth programs that provide an opportunity for youth to disclose to a trusted adult;
- Uncertainty amongst girls as to where they can go to get help for abuse;
- Increased cyberbullying from peers;
- Increased online predation as girls are in the home and online more where they are being targeted by predators requesting sexual images in exchange for money;
- Abuse and sexual exploitation in group homes and foster care placements;
- Girls being pushed into sex trafficking as they and their families struggle to have their basic needs met, including a rise in familial trafficking as parents grow desperate for income and, in some cases, landlords exploiting girls, young women, and their families for sex when they can't pay rent;

- In addition to challenges observing children experiencing abuse, child welfare agencies have been slow to recognize the signs of familial trafficking and remove children from abusive environments;
- Violence taking place is more frequent and aggressive, such as child sex trafficking survivors being subjected to more degrading acts by sex buyers; and
- Inadequate number of therapeutic foster homes for trafficked youth.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Utilize mobile health clinics to check on young people and treat survivors in under-served communities;
- Provide technological supports such as laptops, tablets, and assistance with Internet payments so that young people can stay connected to programs and trusted adults outside the home;
- Partner with online platforms likely to be frequented by youth to disseminate information on available resources should youth experience violence;
- Incorporate peer counseling into transitional housing programs;
- Provide education to service providers to assist them in providing gender- and culturally-responsive services to young people experiencing violence;
- Increase space at shelters for youth and adults who are being sexually exploited;
- Provide alternative housing options for women and young people for whom home is unsafe (e.g. providing funding to rent hotel rooms for survivors and their families);
- Provide funding to youth and their families to meet essential needs (rent, food, etc.) and reduce their vulnerability to exploitation;
- Hold those who threaten or harm people of color accountable including, where appropriate, through the use of fines that can be used to provide supplies and resources for vulnerable communities;
- Continue to investigate complaints of physical and sexual abuse and sexual exploitation and hold those who harm young women and girls accountable;
- Ensure that compassionate release programs for incarcerated individuals are survivor and trauma informed in order to prevent future harm to girls and gender-expansive young people, such as including a history of violence among factors considered in release decisions, mandating release conditions centered on protecting survivors from additional harm, and requiring notice of release to survivors;
- Loosen or eliminate curfew and other restrictions around movement so that those who are fleeing an abusive home can do so without the threat of criminalization;

- Increase funding for campaigns and specific supports to combat xenophobia and to educate the public on how to be allies to the Asian American community and practice bystander intervention;
- Provide additional training to child welfare agencies and staff about child sex trafficking and familial trafficking in particular;
- Increase the number of days that child welfare agencies have to close a case when familial trafficking is suspected;
- Provide additional funding to survivor-led organizations that are serving trafficking survivors and have an increased workload due to COVID-19; and
- Require all staff at group homes and congregate care settings to receive training on how to recognize when youth in their care are being sexually exploited.

ECONOMIC AND FOOD SECURITY

COVID-19, and the related economic crisis, has exacerbated hardships that many marginalized girls, gender-expansive youth, and their families face day to day, including meeting basic needs like access to **food**, reliable transportation, safe housing, and more. This daily instability creates mounting barriers to the attainment of economic health and well-being and threatens to further entrench families in cycles of poverty. Advocates report:

- Food insecurity, including barriers accessing grocery stores due to limited transportation options and food deserts;
- Lack of supplies for infants and young children, especially for young parents who may rely on school and other resources for support;

- Inability to order supplies online due to not having credit cards;
- Joblessness and loss of benefits for young people along with their parents, creating additional financial stressors due to losing multiple sources of income;
- Limited transportation to access healthcare, services, jobs for essential workers, etc.;
- Housing instability due to stressors related to social distancing and shelter-in-place orders, including more cramped living conditions, safety concerns, illness, and limited alternatives for respite such as friends' homes;
- Youth who have aged out of the child welfare system and are homeless face an increased risk of of sexual exploitation due to there being even fewer supports and job opportunities during the pandemic than existed previously;
- Many shelters have limited beds and social distancing efforts have led shelters to have even less capacity; and
- As foster families and potential foster families experience income loss and other stressors, some child welfare agencies are not placing youth with families and for some youth who already have placements - including older youth living away from home for college - those placements may change

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Increase funding for The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and increase benefit caps to accommodate additional needs;
- Child welfare agencies must innovate alternative solutions to shelters and family foster care, in order to provide safe housing for young people;
- Increase funding for shelters to increase the number of beds available and to expand safe housing options;
- Utility companies should offer to remove late fees and provide discounts to people in need;
- Provide funding, directly to families or to service providers, to pay bills and purchase food and other needed supplies;
- Increase funding for in-person mutual aid stations to support girls and their families who may not have access to grocery stores because of food deserts, being homebound, or inadequate transportation;
- Create a hotline for vulnerable people to have food and supplies delivered straight to their homes;
- Ensure public transportation options in low-income communities are kept and expanded to meet social distancing guidelines, to support youth and families needing to access essential employment and services;

- Provide funding to ensure that public transportation agencies are able to comply with cleaning and safety guidelines;
- Provide long-term, flexible funding supports to provide vulnerable girls, gender-expansive youth and their families ongoing financial security;
- Increase funding available to individuals, including young people, in low-wage jobs who are vulnerable to contracting COVID-19 or share a household with a vulnerable person, to give them the flexibility not to work in environments that put their health at risk;
- Create job training and job development programs for young people, women, and people of color who will face steep challenges to finding work if they have been furloughed or let go in a challenging economy; and
- See additional recommendations related to: supporting families to meet basic needs from **Center on Budget and Policy Priorities**, child welfare from **Children's Defense Fund**, homelessness and students experiencing foster care from **National Network for Youth** and the collaborative document from **the Hope Center, Juvenile Law Center, and SchoolHouse Connection.**

JUVENILE JUSTICE

COVID-19 has intensified the existing problem of overpolicing of girls and gender-xpansive youth of color. Outside of facilities the pandemic has been used to justify unnecessary police interactions with these young people; inside of facilities these youth face increased risk of contracting COVID-19 because of cramped conditions. Early advocacy efforts resulted in decreasing youth incarceration in some local jurisdictions, yet, in many jurisdictions youth continue to be held in secure facilities. Concerns related to girls and gender-expansive youth in, or at risk of involvement in, the juvenile justice system are:

- Overpolicing and racial profiling of girls and gender-expansive youth of color, including for behaviors taken to protect themselves and others from the virus, like wearing masks;
- Quarantine measures in facilities that amount to prolonged solitary confinement;
- Poor ability to care for youth who contract COVID-19;
- Lack of safe and viable housing options creates a barrier to release for some youth;
- Lack of support for youth returning home from facilities;
- Decreased or limited access to services in facilities including: limited time outdoors, disruption in education, reduced access to programming, reduced access to food, water and other necessities;
- Providers having difficulty getting access to girls in facilities;
- Girls being disconnected from their families as in-person visits have been halted and access to virtual calls is limited or non-existent; and
- Trafficked girls being left in juvenile detention centers, for nonviolent offenses, during the pandemic because there is no place to house them where they will be safe from their exploiter.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Immediately release as many girls in detention as possible, including those who are: confined pre-adjudication, committed to placement or confinement due to status offenses or violations of probation, placed on charges that are of low or minimum risk to public safety, and those who are medically vulnerable;
- Provide additional supports to girls and youth who face more serious charges;
- End the arrest of girls for behaviors that do not pose a risk to public safety, and instead connect girls and young people to community services and resources;
- Increase funding for diversion programs for girls and gender-expansive youth, including those specific to girls who are being sexually exploited, as these programs not only help keep girls out of the system but also serve to connect vulnerable youth to services;
- Ensure that youth in facilities have access to varied and free communications (phone calls, video calls, email, etc.) to regularly communicate with their families, legal counsel, community service providers, etc.;
- Ensure that youth in facilities have access to healthy, frequent meals and water, quality, non-disruptive education, and substantial time outdoors;
- Provide funding and incentives to facilities housing youth who need to be quarantined due to confirmed or possible exposure to COVID-19 so they can be housed in a non-penal setting where they can receive quality medical care and treatment;
- Provide funding to community-based organizations to ensure they are able to

provide youth with safe housing when returning to their communities, and to ensure that youth are met with supportive services and provided with resources needed to safely and fully integrate back into their communities; and
- Shift the juvenile justice framework to focus on prevention and support, instead of punishment and incarceration.
- For additional recommendations regarding juvenile justice reform that may also be beneficial to girls and gender-expansive young people, see recommendations from **Act4JJ**.

MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

Job loss, school disruption, and fear for health and safety have created **additional stressors** for girls and gender-expansive youth, on top of the chronic marginalization they are already forced to navigate. In addition, they are currently inundated with stories and images of violence against communities of color--Black communities in particular--which can lead to secondary and collective trauma. All of which has the potential to **exacerbate mental health needs.** These youth and the providers and advocates that work with them report:

- Spending increased time with people with whom they have unhealthy relationships due to social distancing/shelter-in-place restrictions;
- Expectations rooted in stereotypical gender roles related to household duties, including housekeeping and caretaking for siblings, are adding additional pressures on girls and their ability to engage in other responsibilities such as schoolwork or work outside the home;
- Feeling emotionally isolated and disconnected as a result of not being able to interact with their peers, participate in programs, etc.;

- Feeling concern and additional stress about their health, managing responsibilities (such as school, childcare, etc.) and missing out on major life events (such as prom, graduation, etc.);
- Concern about the onset of depression, particularly as the pandemic progresses and access to mental health supports and services remains limited; and
- Lack of privacy, technology, and time are limiting the ability to engage in group supports and create challenges to engaging in coping strategies and activities to alleviate stress.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Increase mobile services, including for rapid response to high needs situations;
- Expand access to free telehealth services for therapy, counseling, support groups, and other mental health supports;
- Increase funding for remote mentorship opportunities and other programs to check in on young people;
- Provide funding, directly to families or to service providers, to pay utility bills (e.g. electric and Internet) and purchase tablets, computers, or other supplies needed to participate in telehealth services and virtual programming;
- Develop innovative solutions for providers to safely meet with youth who are struggling in isolation;
- Increase funding for arts programming that can support alternative stress release; and
- Fund accessible programming for youth with disabilities.

MEDICAL CARE

MEDICAL CARE

The pandemic has revealed new and heightened existing disparities surrounding accessing high-quality and affordable healthcare - related and unrelated to COVID-19 symptoms - especially among **communities of color**, and communities living **on reservations**. Providers and advocates working with girls and gender-expansive youth report the following challenges and barriers:

- Risk of exposing family members to COVID-19 because of the need to continue working outside the home;
- Concern about the health of family members who are sick and may need to be quarantined in the home, and related concern for other older family members in the home who are not sick, particularly if space is limited;
- Lack of access to medical care for conditions unrelated to COVID-19;
- Increased restrictions to abortion access;
- Challenges related to accessing prenatal care;
- Limits on the number of people present during and after labor;
- Information gaps related to routine medical care, such as vision, dental, and wellness checks; and
- Diminished access to healthcare previously provided in school.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Provide and expand Mobile Health Units for testing and healthcare services, including increased COVID-19 testing for vulnerable communities, prenatal services for young parents, and other non-COVID related health needs;
- Increase access to free phone- and computer-based medical visits for vulnerable communities, including pregnant and parenting young people, low-income communities, and others with limited access to healthcare;
- Ensure that information regarding access to and changes to health services are available to those living in low-income communities and distributed in a manner accessible to people little to no access to the Internet;
- Classify abortions as essential health services, consistent with statements by the American Medical Association;
- Provide protective equipment to communities of color and increase availability of testing and contact tracing to help slow the spread of the virus; and
- Allow pregnant youth to have family with them during delivery and provide PPE to limit health risks.

EDUCATION

Recognizing that the school year is coming - or has already come - to an end, the COVID pandemic and the resulting shift to virtual classrooms greatly impacted the **educational experiences** of all youth. Girls at the margins faced additional challenges, including the loss of access to much **needed resources**. Girls also lost other important supports **normally accessible through schools**. Without intentional planning and safeguards, these challenges will also impact youth attending summer school or classes in the fall, particularly given the ongoing nature of the pandemic. Researchers anticipate **high rates of trauma** as students return to school both directly and indirectly caused by the pandemic. Girls, gender-expansive youth, providers, and advocates report:

- Disparities in instruction (e.g. some students report an overwhelming increase in school workload while others' instruction has ceased entirely);
- Lack of instruction and support needed to successfully engage in and complete schoolwork, including assistance using technology that young people may not have used before or are using in new ways;
- Lack of access to the technology necessary for remote learning (e.g. Internet, laptops, etc.) due to homelessness, a lack of financial resources, living in rural areas or on reservations, sharing tech with other members of the household, and other barriers;
- Loss of critical resources typically accessed in schools, including meals, menstrual products, and healthcare;
- Loss of access to in-person school, after-school, and summer programming that provides academic support as well as social and emotional support, adult mentors, and a safe space to connect with peers;
- Concern about whether expensive senior fees will be reimbursed and how graduating seniors will pay for college, particularly as parents and teens suffer economically; and
- For college students, stress about possible loss of critical university and college resources such as healthcare, meals, and safe housing.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Provide funding, directly to families or to service providers, to pay utility bills (e.g. electric and Internet) and purchase tablets, computers, or other supplies needed to participate in remote learning;
- Distribute programming and curricula designed for youth with disabilities, and additional resources for families to support individualized learning;
- Provide funding for community-based service providers to fill the gaps in support needed by students (e.g. technological support, tutoring, college prep assistance, meals, menstrual products, etc.);
- Provide funding to assist college students in paying for their education;
- Provide funding to out-of-school time youth development organizations so they can continue programming and mentoring remotely until schools are fully reopened;
- Issue guidance, developed in consultation with girls, gender-expansive youth, their families and advocates, for school systems and institutions of higher education as to how they can assist students in continuing their education and close achievements gaps (e.g. increased access to guidance counselors and social workers; sharing models of innovative, remote, school-related enrichment activities; extending college application deadlines, etc.); and
- Provide additional emergency K-12 education funding for schools facing declining revenues, increased pressures on their budgets in the form of healthcare and unemployment needs, and new education-related expenses needed to adjust to our new and evolving reality.

IMMIGRATION

IMMIGRATION

Unaccompanied minors, recipients of the Deferred Action For Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, the children of undocumented immigrant parents, and other immigrant communities face additional and unique pressures during this pandemic. These include increased risk in **shelters** and **detention** centers, **working** in **essential industries** without proper protections or compensation, risk through **deportation proceedings**, and **decreased financial** supports. Immigrant girls, gender- expansive youth, providers, and advocates report:

- Detention centers and shelters for unaccompanied youth can serve as hotbeds for the spread of COVID-19;
- Immigration cases for unaccompanied minors are still being processed, especially in areas with widespread cases of COVID-19;
- Immigrants work in industries considered essential at higher rates putting them at higher risk of illness, but undocumented immigrants do not have access to widespread resources available to other workers in recent COVID-19 related stimulus packages (including free medical care for COVID-19 related medical expenses, stimulus payments, and unemployment benefits) or workplace protections;
- DACA recipients face concerns related to office closures and timing of renewals; and
- DACA recipients and undocumented students are excluded from accessing COVID-19 related student aid.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Shift the immigration framework from a carceral response to a public health response, including:
  - Ensure healthcare and other resources are available to all members of our community;
  - Release unaccompanied minors from shelters and detention into the care of family or other relatives in the United States;
  - Stop deportation proceedings; and
  - Stop new detainment and immigration enforcement cases during this pandemic.
- Fund supports and services for DACA youth who are losing access to necessary resources due to school closures;
- Ensure that government-funded resources provided to members of the general public to address the pandemic are also accessible to immigrant youth and their families, including those who are undocumented, including providing payments to address gaps caused by exclusion from benefits and services made available to others in prior stimulus packages;

- Ensure that all essential workers, including those who are undocumented, have access to safe working conditions, personal protective equipment (PPE), fair compensation, and unemployment benefits so they can remain at home if they are sick; and
- See additional recommendations from Center on Budget and Policy Priorities and United Nations Network on Migration.

ORGANIZATIONAL NEEDS

Direct service providers, advocates, community members, and non-profit organizations are engaging in additional and critical work to support girls, gender-expansive youth, and their families during this time. The struggle for resources to support regular programming has only been heightened by the expanded and urgent needs of the communities where they work. As the pandemic drags on, the pressures associated with sustaining the provision of critical supports intensifies. Organizations report concerns regarding:

- Increased demand for additional staff & volunteers to respond to urgent and rising needs;
- Keeping current staff employed and paid as well as unexpected costs associated with paying for unemployment benefits by organizations which are self-insured and have had to lay off or furlough staff members;
- Need for protective equipment to help protect themselves and others as some services require in-person interactions;
- Healthcare for contracted workers;
- Staff grappling with trauma caused by the pandemic;
- Childcare for workers still needing to leave their homes;
- Newfound challenges to fundraising for pressing needs and for general operating support during and after COVID-19; and
- Anticipated decreased donations in response to economic repercussions of COVID-19.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Funding for additional staff needed to address increasing community needs and accommodate organizational changes necessary to respond to those needs (e.g. social workers, tech support, grant writers);
- Funding for technological devices needed to virtually support youth and families;
- Funding for PPE, online software, trainings and other resources needed to adapt to shifting needs;
- Access to free COVID testing;
- Funding for mental health supports to staff who need assistance in coping with communal trauma as a result of the pandemic;
- Funding to protect and support service providers against financial instability stemming from the loss of program revenue as well as delayed and cancelled contracts; and
- Discounts in costs of services and products purchased by non-profits to continue operations (e.g., car insurance discounts).

THE URGENT NEEDS SHARED IN THIS BRIEF, BY YOUNG PEOPLE AND THOSE WHO SUPPORT THEM, HIGHLIGHTS THE CRITICAL SUPPORTS NEEDED TO ADDRESS THE ROOT CAUSES THAT PUSH GIRLS AND GENDER-EXPANSIVE YOUNG PEOPLE TO THE MARGINS OF OUR SOCIETY.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed new and intensified issues, which stem from historical and structural oppression at all levels of our society. As such, it is vital that funders and policymakers develop and support policies and practices that encompass both the immediate and long-term needs of girls and gender-expansive youth and correct these longstanding inequities. Later in 2020, G@TM will release a policy platform that describes in more detail the systemic challenges faced by girls and gender-expansive young people experiencing marginalization along with policy solutions to help address those challenges.

Girls @ the Margin National Alliance (G@TM) is an affiliation of local, state, and national organizations and advocates working across sectors and systems to address root causes of the complex issues confronting marginalized girls, young women, and gender-expansive youth. G@TM was founded in 2011 by National Crittenton and Rights4Girls. The founders are joined on the steering committee by the Georgetown Center on Poverty and Inequality, Girls Inc., and the National Women's Law Center.

Many thanks to the G@TM partner organizations who provided insight into what is happening in communities during this pandemic.

This brief was written by Cherice Hopkins at Rights4Girls and Samantha López at National Crittenton, and edited by Sonja Breda at Girls Inc., on behalf of these organizations and the full G@TM Steering Committee.

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