



Young female victims of sexual abuse are often viewed as criminals.

Girls Behind Bars

A new report finds abused girls are at risk of being sent to prison. **Malika Saada Saar** of The Human Rights Project for Girls explains why



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Not long ago, I met Denise*, a young woman who told me her uncle had repeatedly raped her from the time she was 8. To end the abuse, Denise deliberately got pregnant by another man. The uncle stopped raping her, but Denise became a mother at 15. Sadly, I did not meet Denise at a support

group for incest survivors. I met her in a Delaware detention center for girls. She was behind bars for truancy. Mind you, Denise missed school to take care of her baby. After her incarceration, relatives took the child.

Denise's story highlights the plight of so many incarcerated girls, who are often themselves victims of a crime. According to the Department of Justice, 73 percent of girls behind bars have been sexually and physically abused; 40 percent have been raped. To escape abuse, many girls

run away, skip school or act out. These behaviors are often cries for help. But instead of getting support, troubled girls—many of them Black—are ushered into the prison pipeline.

Girls of color account for nearly two thirds of the female juvenile justice population, often receiving the most severe sentences. The majority are not gang-bangers, drug dealers or violent offenders; they are wounded children. Why are they not treated as victims?

In 2011 I founded The Human Rights Project for Girls (Rights4Girls) to lobby for policy change around gender-based violence. This fall we will release an as-yet-unnamed policy report detailing how our girls end up in the criminal justice system. For more than a year, we interviewed nearly 100 incarcerated girls in New York, California and Washington. More than half of the girls we spoke to told us they ran away from homes or foster care placements because they were being molested—only to be

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arrested for running away. The girls were angry they had been treated as criminals rather than as victims of sexual assault.

Other girls described running away from home and landing in the arms of sex traffickers. According to the Department of Justice, there are about 293,000 American children vulnerable to trafficking, the majority of them girls between ages 12 and 14.

These children are abducted, raped or beaten into submission—and sometimes tattooed, branded like slaves.

Such survivors of rape and other horrors are in desperate need of services to help them heal. Instead, they are routinely incarcerated for prostitution. One survivor, Withelma "T" Ortiz Walker Pettigrew, told

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us that between age 10 and 17, she was sexually abused by men who bought and sold her, yet she was the one sent to jail. "I was a child who had been raped and then put in jail for being raped," T, now 23, told me.

T's not alone. A study of delinquent girls in California found that 81 percent of chronically delinquent girls reported being physically abused; 56 percent reported sexual abuse. Another study found that among detained girls, the median age of their first sexual encounter was 7. It is time to shine some light their way. Girls get less than 3 percent of funding for juvenile delinquency prevention. We need to make them a priority. At Rights4Girls, we are lobbying legislators for alternative sentencing and community-based programs for our most vulnerable children. It is time to help girls like Denise and T heal.

Malika Saada Saar is the executive director of Rights4Girls, an advocacy organization in Washington, D.C.

**Name has been changed to protect subject's privacy.*