

# Where The Girls Are

What We Know and Need to Know About New York City Girls



A Report Commissioned by  
Girls Incorporated of New York City

Girls Incorporated of New York City (Girls Inc. NYC) is determined to create a more gender-equitable future for today's young people, particularly urban girls in high risk, underserved areas throughout New York City. Girls Inc. NYC initiatives enable girls of all ages to build the skills and confidence necessary for responsible adulthood, economic independence and personal fulfillment. Girls Inc. NYC was founded in 1999 and reaches more than 1,000 girls annually. It is an independent affiliate of Girls Incorporated®, a national youth-serving organization.



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# **Where The Girls Are**

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# Foreword

*"...All of us girls would like to challenge you...we have done and will continue doing all that we can to make this a safer place for girls to live in. Still, we can only do so much on our own. So we challenge you...to support us, guide us, talk to us, and most importantly to listen to what we have to say." (Geny Cabral, age 16 – Girls Inc. of New York City Student)*

More than anything, Geny Cabral's words capture the true essence of what Girls Incorporated of New York City (Girls Inc. of NYC) is all about: supporting, guiding, talking to girls and listening to what girls have to say. Girls Inc. of NYC, an independent affiliate of the national youth serving organization, Girls Incorporated, was specifically created to listen to and respond to the needs of girls in New York City.

Girls Inc. of NYC is dedicated to the unique needs and potential of girls living in the city. We commissioned this first-ever report devoted exclusively to the needs of girls in the city hoping that it would be a first, momentous step towards understanding what it is like to be a girl in these five boroughs -- you can't improve what you don't know. This report brings us a little closer to knowing the current landscape of the lives of New York City girls -- what is good, what is bad, and what is unknown. Because of that, we believe that this report is a benchmark for Girls Inc. of NYC, for girls, and for everyone who cares about the environment in which our young people are maturing.

This report will further inform the work we have already begun with and on behalf of New York City girls -- work that includes direct service to girls, partnerships with an extensive network of community-based organizations that bring our programs to girls in 22 New York City neighborhoods, and collaborations with schools and public agencies to address girls' needs and to affirm their strengths. Our commitment to New York City girls is to take what we have learned from this report and to build an organizational, program and advocacy agenda reflective of their needs.

Girls in New York City are in the paradoxical situation of living in a city with the greatest opportunities and resources and some of the largest barriers and problems. In fact, speaking as a New York City girl, Geny continued her UN speech by pointing out,

*"It is clear that the issues American girls face day to day are far less severe than those of other girls around the world. The issues we face are not along the lines of female genital mutilation...still, for a country that has an abundance of resources and a developed government, there are issues common to all girls."*

Geny includes among these issues the educational disparity between girls and boys, the disparity of privilege between children of economic means and those of limited means, and the limited options available to girls of color, particularly poor girls of color. These are all issues of concern to Girls Inc. of NYC. Many of the city's girls are bold, smart and resourceful, and we know they are eager to advise adults in how to improve the world for girls. It is our job to listen to them and work with them to make New York City a more girl-friendly, gender-equitable environment for all our young people.

We are grateful to Didi Barrett and the Board of Directors of Girls Incorporated of New York City for their inspired leadership and support; to the Academy for Educational Development for undertaking this project with us; to Lindsay Shea, the Woodcock Foundation, the Overbrook Foundation and the Bodman Foundation for providing us with their generous support to fund this research; to Sally Baker, Associate Executive Director for her single-minded thoroughness; and to the girls of New York City.

**(The Rev.) Emma Jordan-Simpson**  
Executive Director

# Acknowledgments

Conducting a study on what we know and need to know about girls in New York City was a complex and ambitious endeavor. This report reflects the effort and cooperation of many people. First, we thank the staff and board members at Girls Incorporated of New York City, especially Sally Baker, for their support, feedback, and guidance throughout this challenging effort. We also thank the 35 key informants and experts who allowed us to interview them and shared their knowledge and insights about girls in New York City, as well as the 150 girls who participated in focus groups and gave us their important perspectives. The focus groups played a key role in illuminating our perceptions about how girls across the city from all ethnic and racial groups are faring. In addition, we thank the many individuals and organizations that helped us identify girls and schedule the groups.

Many AED staff and consultants also contributed to this evaluation. The research team included Kari Nelsestuen, Nancy Nevárez, Amy Ritchie, and Lea Williams, all of whom participated in data collection and analysis. Nancy Nevárez also led the focus groups and wrote the focus-group chapter. The research team, along with Elayne Archer, Sally Baker, Alice Radosh, Linda Simkin, and Constancia Warren acted as an internal advisory board to the project. Amy Ritchie provided administrative support and created the Geographic Information System maps; Elayne Archer edited this report; and Noemi Corujo, Wanda Dallas, Frances Segura, and Matt Walker provided additional administrative support. Without the support and assistance of all of these individuals, this report would not have been possible.

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Alexandra Weinbaum, Ph.D.

New York City

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# In Their Own Words ...

## On Being a Girl

*I like being a girl because I like knowing women in history have done great things and I like that I am one—a girl.*

*Sometimes I don't like being a girl because some people think you can't do this or that because you're a girl.*

*If a girl dresses a certain way, they say, "she asked for it."*

*I don't like the stereotypes of girls. It's hard to get away from them, even if you don't think about it... There's a double standard for girls and boys. Even I think that way, but I wish I didn't. It's from society.*

*I see how my mom treats my brother differently. She gives my brother more freedom. Why do I have to be tied down because I'm a girl?*

*I like being a girl because of the challenges, and I like challenges. You have to prove to yourself and to others that you can do the same as them. I love it when I prove someone wrong. I love it.*

## Advice to Other Girls

*Do YOU! That means do for yourself. Don't do it for whoever wants you to do it. Don't get married because your mother wants you to. Don't have sex because someone wants you to. Be what you want to be. Do what you want to do. DO YOU!*

*Follow your own path. Make yourself unique as one person.*

*Be strong and confident. Be proud of who you are or where you come from—even if people make fun of you.*

*Speak the truth. Stay in school. There's a lot to do after high school. I'm not going to tell them not to have sex. I'm not condoning it, but if you do, then try to protect yourself because things happen. There's a long life ahead of you.*

*Don't give in to peer pressure. It may be hard, but you'll see it's better to do what you thought was right.*

*If you want something you have to stick to it, be willing to work hard and in the end it will pay off.*

# Executive Summary

**A**ttention to girls' issues has increased both internationally and nationally over the last decade. Most notably, the 1995 World Conference on Women held in Beijing brought to the forefront the pressing issues of girls worldwide, and recent research has helped create a clearer picture of the status of girls in the United States. However, there is a paucity of readily available data on the status of girls in New York City.

Agencies and organizations that collect status indicators on New York City youth often do not disaggregate or report these data by gender. Less common still is the reporting of data for small geographical areas such as community districts. Rather, data are often presented for the city as a whole or by borough, which conceals vast differences in status indicators for youth in different parts of the city, masks gender-specific needs, and obscures how girls of different ages and backgrounds experience important aspects of their lives. As a result of this lack of gender- and community-specific data, there is no easily accessible source of data on New York City girls for a range of indicators to provide essential information for advocates, funders, policymakers, and youth-service providers to plan and implement programs addressing the specific issues and needs of girls in New York City.

This report, commissioned by Girls Incorporated of New York City (Girls Inc. of NYC) strives to address the "statistical invisibility" of girls and young women in New York City. Its goal is to provide useful information about the status of girls and young women to inform policymakers, community activists, and funders, as well as to guide Girls Inc. of NYC's future work. The study, conducted by the Academy for Educational Development (AED), focused on indicators in five areas: 1) health; 2) sexuality and reproductive health; 3) education; 4) violence, victimization, and safety; and 5) sports, fitness, and positive youth development activities. AED took a three-pronged approach to data collection, including collecting statistical data from existing sources, interviewing 35 experts and key informants, and conducting focus-group interviews with 150 girls across the city.

This report is offered as a starting point. In *Keeping Track of New York City's Children* (1999), the Citizens' Committee for Children of New York report how New York City children are faring. In this study, Girls Inc. of NYC asked how girls, in particular, are faring. Because this is the first time the question of how girls are doing has been asked, there is a great deal that could not be answered. What was learned from this study, however, was very instructive. The study showed that while, in some cases, the needs of New York City girls are the same as the needs of youth in general, in other areas the needs of girls are unique and require targeted solutions on the part of policymakers and service providers. Perhaps the most useful information arising from this study was a confirmation of the importance of the question about the welfare of girls in New York City because the answer matters. The fact that data needed to answer this question are limited and, in some areas, nonexistent, also matters. It speaks to the need to continue to ask agencies to collect and report data by gender (and other key subgroups), to advocate for additional data collection in key areas of concern, and to publish and disseminate the findings regularly.

## DEMOGRAPHIC CONTEXT

The indicators of New York City girls' well-being should be viewed in the context of the demographic makeup of the city. In the last decade, New York City has become increasingly culturally and linguistically diverse. One-third of New York City's residents are foreign-born, and over 100,000 new immigrants settle in the city each year.<sup>1</sup>



**Girls and young women desire girls-only programming and a separate space for girls.**

*I wouldn't change all the obstacles and aspects that have happened. That's what made me a stronger person. That's what made me a little more intelligent in life. (High school teen from Manhattan)*

*In school, girls complain about boys pushing, but they [staff] don't do anything or they tell you to ignore them. (Girl from large public school)*

*[We need] a safe place for girls to talk about problems, where they could talk about anything that is bothering them. Sometimes girls can't go to their parents and they don't go to anybody in school so I would build a place they could just come and talk. (High school teen from Brooklyn)*

Most recently, the largest influx of immigrants has been from the former Soviet Union and the Dominican Republic. The city's diversity creates many challenges to service providers in addressing the different needs of girls and young women. Further, many communities are grappling with extreme poverty. Although some economic indicators have improved in New York City over the last decade, the percentage of children living in poverty has increased by 6% while the percentage living in families receiving public assistance has decreased by 13% as a result of changes in welfare policies.

The most salient findings from the study, including access issues and barriers to needed programs and services, are summarized below. Because of the importance of including the voices of New York City girls in this study, findings from the focus groups are summarized first.

#### **NEW YORK CITY GIRLS SPEAK OUT: FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS**

Girls in New York City have much to say about their lives, needs, and desires. Focus group discussions with 150 girls revealed their inner strength and perseverance as well as their thoughts about a number of issues affecting their daily lives. Focus group participants were from all five boroughs and represented a diverse group of individuals with respect to age (ranging from 8 to 22), race, ethnicity, and cultural background. Key findings include the following:

**Girls are aware of and angry about gender inequities at home and school**, especially around sports, household chores, and parents' curtailing of their freedom much more than that of boys.

**Girls and young women show great strength and resilience** in the face of these inequities.

**Issues of safety are of paramount concern for girls.** Girls are concerned about violence and bullying and teasing, especially at school. On the whole, girls at small schools described feeling safe at school, while girls at large schools felt less safe. Many girls stated that incidences of harassment were largely ignored by school staff.

#### **HEALTH**

Data from interviews with experts and health providers and focus groups with girls, as well as indicator data, reveal several areas of concern for girls in New York City.

**Girls and young women in New York City show an alarmingly high rate of emotional distress.**

- In 1997, nearly one-fourth (22%) of high school girls reported having seriously considered suicide. This is double the rate for boys (11%).<sup>2</sup>

**New York City girls drink and use drugs at lower rates than New York City boys and girls nationwide.**

- 37% of New York City high school females reported current use of alcohol compared with 48% nationwide and 42% of males in New York City in 1997.
- 12% of New York City high school females reported current use of marijuana compared with 21% nationwide and 19% of males in New York City in 1997.

**New York City girls smoke less than girls nationwide but more than New York City boys.**

- 24% of New York City high school females reported current use of cigarettes compared with 35% of females nationwide and 23% of males in New York City in 1997.



**Data from 1990 to 1994 indicate that substance use among New York City youth is on the rise, particularly use of cigarettes and marijuana.**<sup>3</sup> More recent trend data for New York City are not available, making it difficult to know if the trend has continued.

Body-image issues are another area of concern for girls' health. While little statistical data exist on this issue, experts note that **"body distress" is increasing among young women of all classes and racial and ethnic groups.**

## **SEXUALITY AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH**

Sexuality and reproductive health are complex areas of particular concern for girls and young women as they enter puberty and mature. **In some areas of sexuality and reproductive health, girls in New York City have made progress:**

- **Pregnancies and teen birth rates have declined** in New York City in the last decade in all age groups.<sup>4</sup>
- **Gonorrhea rates have decreased** among girls aged 15 to 19 by 44% since 1990.<sup>5</sup>

Despite advances made in lowering the rate of sexually transmitted infections, pregnancies, and teen births, **data for New York City still indicate a tremendous unmet need for reproductive health and sexuality services and pregnancy prevention programs.**

- **Over 30,000 teen-aged girls in New York City became pregnant in 1998**—nearly 1,000 were under age 15.<sup>6</sup>
- **Latina teens are making the least progress in terms of teen births** as evidenced by the increase in the proportion of births to Latinas from 39% in 1985 to 51% in 1997.<sup>7</sup>
- **Gonorrhea rates, while on the decline in New York City, were highest among girls aged 15 to 19: they were 260% higher than the rate for males of the same age and 516% higher than the rate for all age groups in the city in 1998.**<sup>8</sup>
- **33% of sexually active high school females did not use a condom during their last sexual encounter** in 1997.<sup>9</sup> In one 1995 study, 22% of females found themselves in a situation where they

wanted to use a condom but their partner did not. When in these situations, 42% reported having sex without a condom.<sup>10</sup>

**Helping girls and young women develop negotiation skills so that they can ask for what they want and need in intimate relationships is critical,** according to all the health experts interviewed. Negotiating condom use is one issue that is particularly difficult and important for young women. One health expert noted the need to undermine the prejudice against condoms among teens: "We must undermine the idea prevalent in adolescent populations that 'If I love you, you must be clean,' or conversely, 'If I use a condom then I must not love you.'"

*Most women and girls are not taught to relate to their bodies or to exert power in relationships. They do not understand power dynamics and have trouble understanding boundaries and creating relationships with boundaries. (Health educator)*

*Many young women tolerate things in relationships that more empowered people won't tolerate, such as abuse and breaks in trust, which lead to more exposure to HIV and other risks. So young women and men need to talk about loving relationships. (Health expert)*

**Accessing accurate information about sexual health is critical for adolescent girls.** According to one practitioner, many girls in New York City do not have access to health information at all: "They don't get information in school and they don't get it from their parents. Their information primarily comes from the media, which is problematic." There are a number of obstacles to health information and services in general: lack of information on where to access services; the complexities of navigating the system; fragmentation of services; and issues of confidentiality and trust in providers. These barriers also hold true for reproductive health and sexuality services. In addition, obstacles to sexuality and reproductive health services include the stigma associated with certain services and the clash with family values around health and sexuality that affects many girls, particularly those from immigrant families. It is clear that in spite of some progress, the need for accessible sexuality education and prevention programs in New York City is great.

## EDUCATION

Overall, the indicators on education present a mixed story for girls and young women in New York City. **In several areas of academic achievement, girls and young women are performing at about the same level as male students and, in a few areas, better than male students.** For example, there are small gender differences in mathematics and reading standardized test scores and Regents-exam-passing rates, generally favoring female students.<sup>11</sup> In other areas, such as vocational/technical school enrollment and access to technology, female students are not faring as well as male students. **Vocational/technical schools are still largely segregated by gender,<sup>12</sup> and male and female rates of taking technology courses and advanced placement tests are disparate.<sup>13</sup>** Both of these factors have implications for girls' career choices and earning potential. Finally, **violence and safety in school are concerns of many girls and experts interviewed for this study,** as discussed below.

## VIOLENCE, VICTIMIZATION, AND SAFETY

**Safety is a paramount concern for New York City girls and their families, with girls reporting violence and harassment in and outside of school as major issues in their lives.** In focus groups, girls from all over the city recounted times when they had felt threatened or harassed in school, and in many cases, their concerns had

*Even if the activity is after school, if they live outside the neighborhood where the activity is taking place, girls usually can't participate. They are concerned for their safety and their parents do not want them out that late. (CBO staff person)*

not been addressed by school personnel. Currently, there are no reliable mechanisms in place in New York City to collect data on incidences of sexual harassment, either in or outside school. Complaints about safety were less common from girls who attended small schools where the school culture fostered an environment in which bullying, teasing, and threatening behavior were not tolerated. Further, according to girls interviewed, small schools were more likely than

large ones to have procedures and mechanisms in place to handle these situations if they occurred.

**Girls' safety is not only a concern in school, but also an issue that affects girls' access to services and activities.** Several informants described a "severe lack of

safe space in New York City that is open, convenient and girl-friendly." Many interviewees reported that parents, especially those new to the country, do not want their daughters to be out of the house in the evenings or on weekends. Even programs taking place directly after school may be off-limits if located too far from home. Night programming is also not viable for many girls, especially if travel is involved.

Because of the limited data available by gender, it is not possible to identify an exact number of girls and young women who are affected by violence or victimization. The following statistics highlight some areas of concern:

**Girls in New York City are three times more likely to be reported victims of sexual abuse than males.<sup>14</sup>**

**Relationship abuse among teens—estimated to affect 60% of teens—is the fastest growing type of domestic violence.<sup>15</sup>**

**While juvenile arrests for felonies overall have decreased by 26% from 1990 to 1998, the proportion of felony arrests to girls in New York City has increased from 9% to 12%.<sup>16</sup>** In addition, the number of girls found by the courts to be "Persons in Need of Supervision" has nearly doubled from 1990 to 1997.<sup>17</sup>

## SPORTS, FITNESS AND POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

Research on the positive benefits of sports, fitness and youth development programs is clear. Benefits include enhanced mental and physical health, avoidance of risky behavior, and improved academic outcomes. However, because of safety concerns, responsibilities at home, cultural issues, or lack of girl-friendly spaces and programs, **many girls are not taking advantage of sports and youth development programs:**

*Girls these days don't just like make-up and shopping. We like sports like football, basketball. (Middle school student)*

**Just over one-fourth of New York City high school girls (26%) participated in school team sports in 1997.** This is far fewer girls than the proportion nationwide participating in school sports (42%).<sup>18</sup>

- **Less than half the proportion of high school girls in New York City (20%) participated in sports outside of school compared with males (45%).**<sup>19</sup>
- According to one 1999 study, less than half of seventh-grade girls (48%) participated weekly in any type of afterschool program including arts, academics or youth programs, compared with 58% of boys at the same grade level.<sup>20</sup>
- According to the same study, 13% of seventh-grade girls in New York City participated in student government, and 17% said they had participated in community service. Rates were equally low for boys.<sup>21</sup>
- **The need for programming related to communication and negotiation skills** for both girls and boys, including programming helping girls be assertive in intimate relationships
- **The need for girl-friendly space and programs**
- **The need for service providers who are sensitive to the needs of girls**, particularly for immigrant girls who may have specific issues regarding access to afterschool programs and health and sexuality issues

**The study also reveals the need to address the “statistical invisibility” of girls in New York City.**

There are several key indicators where additional data should be collected or where agencies need to be encouraged to analyze and report data by gender, demographic subgroups (such as age and race/ethnicity), and for smaller, meaningful geographic areas to help identify areas of most critical need. Areas with the greatest data needs include:

- Mental health and body image
- Access to technology and advanced mathematics and science courses
- Sexual harassment and violence against girls in school
- Participation in positive youth development activities

## CONCLUSION

The baseline data presented here illustrate the many complexities and difficulties experienced by girls and young women of all backgrounds in New York City, as well as their strength and resilience in facing these challenges. In several areas, girls in New York City have made progress. For example, pregnancies, teen births, and sexually transmitted infections are on the decline and girls are performing on a par with boys in standardized mathematics and reading tests. In other areas, such as gender desegregation of vocational schools, little progress has been made.

Although there is a dearth of data in some key areas, as well as natural limitations to this study, the findings point to some specific areas of need and concern for girls in New York City. These include:

- **Concerns about safety and sexual harassment in schools and youth programs**
- **Girls’ lack of access to and participation in sports, youth development programs, and nontraditional programs and courses**, especially girls from underserved populations (e.g., immigrant, lesbian, disabled, and homeless youth)
- **The need for reproductive health and prevention services**, with a special emphasis on understanding why Latinas have made the least progress in reducing teen births

Until data on these and other key indicators of girls’ well-being are collected and reported regularly, any assessment of how girls in New York City are faring will be limited. Further, advocates, funders, policymakers, and youth-service providers will continue to work without essential information when planning and implementing programs to address the specific issues and needs of girls in the city. Lastly, as advocates, policymakers, and service providers use the findings in this and other reports to address the needs of New York City girls, it is of paramount importance to ensure that all girls’ voices be heard and included in program planning, implementation, and assessment.

## Endnotes

1. New York City Department of City Planning (1999). *The Newest New Yorkers 1995-1996*. NY:Author.
2. All of the health data are from New York City Board of Education (1999). *Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System Survey*, unpublished data for New York City, unless noted otherwise.
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8. See note 5.
9. See note 2.
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19. Ibid.
20. Academy for Educational Development (1999). Unpublished data.
21. Ibid.

**The Academy for Educational Development (AED)** is an independent, nonprofit organization committed to addressing human development needs in the United States and throughout the world. AED's School and Community Services department uses multidisciplinary approaches to address critical issues in education, health, and youth development. To achieve its goals, the department provides technical assistance to strengthen schools, school districts, and community-based organizations. It conducts evaluations of school and community programs while striving to provide the skills and impetus for practitioners to undertake ongoing assessment and improvement. The department also manages large-scale initiatives to strengthen practitioner networks and accelerate systems change. It uses the knowledge gained from this work to advocate for effective policies and practices and disseminate information through publications, presentations, and on the World Wide Web. For more information about the work of AED's School and Community Services department, contact Patrick Montesano or Alexandra Weinbaum, co-executive directors, 212-243-1110, or visit the department website at [www.aed.org/scs](http://www.aed.org/scs).