



Hennepin County's Gender-Specific Programs

*2016 Evaluation Report
Evaluation of Programs Designed to Meet the Needs of System-
involved Girls*

F E B R U A R Y 2 0 1 7

Prepared by:
Julie Atella and Sophak Mom

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Wilder Research contributors include:

Emma Connell

Marilyn Conrad

Amanda Hane

Cheryl Holm-Hansen

Nora Johnson

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Thao Vang

Kerry Walsh

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Background

Staff from Hennepin County's Department of Community Corrections and Rehabilitation (DOCCR) and Human Services and Public Health Department (HSPHD) have been working with Wilder Research for two years to collect and analyze program data from community-based programs they fund that provide services to system-involved youth. The programs involved in the evaluation are Girl's Circle H.E.A.R.T, Hold Your Horses, the Link POWER Program, and Runaway Intervention Program.

The evaluation is supported by Local Collaborative Time Study (LCTS) funding. The 2016 evaluation focused on collecting gender-specific outcomes, including safety, coping, well-being, and relationship building.

This report summarizes the findings from the data collection of the following programs:

- **Girls Circle H.E.A.R.T.:** The YMCA runs Girls Circle H.E.A.R.T., a gender-responsive curriculum, for Hennepin County-involved adolescent girls. It includes a 16 week curriculum that provides recreational, individual, and group learning experiences; individual and family support; crisis intervention, transportation, and trauma-informed resources and referrals; as well as educational support through coordinating support services, monitoring attendance, and attending school meetings.
- **Hold Your Horses:** Cairns Psychological Services provides gender-responsive equine-assisted group psychotherapy through their Hold Your Horses program. This equine therapy treatment model focuses on improvement of adaptive functioning skills for youth who have experienced or are at high risk of experiencing sexual exploitation, abuse, or trauma. Hold Your Horses assists in the development of these skills by helping youth to focus on mindfulness, self-regulation, self-soothing, and self-awareness. Group takes place for two hours, one time per week, for 10 consecutive weeks.
- **Runaway Intervention Program (RIP):** Midwest Children's Resource Center's RIP program is an advanced practice nurse-led initiative to help severely sexually assaulted or exploited girls reconnect to family, school, and health care resources. The two components of the program are: 1) an initial complex health and abuse assessment at the hospital-based Child Advocacy Center and 2) 12 months of ongoing care, including health assessments, medical care, treatment for post-traumatic stress disorder and depression, and confidential reproductive health care.

- **The Link POWER Program:** The Link operates a gender specific, trauma-informed program for probation involved girls age 12 through 19 called POWER (Positive Opportunities for Women of Every Race). The POWER Program is a combination of individualized case management and structured group programming serving girls throughout Hennepin County. The goal of the program is to prevent further justice involvement and to create an environment where young women can build relationships with one another, seek and give support, and discuss relevant topics around restorative justice, family and community connections, education and economic self-sufficiency, and health and wellness. The POWER Program is co-designed by a Youth Advisory Committee, called the VOICE (Vision of Intelligence Creating Equity) Committee (<http://thelinkmn.org/power/>).

Methods

Continuing the methods employed in the past year's report, this evaluation incorporated a mixed-method approach which included both qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis. For this report, data collection occurred between January 2015 and January 2016, and included the following pieces:

- **In-person and phone interviews:** A total of 25 interviews were completed with youth from across the four programs: Girls Circle H.E.A.R.T., Hold your Horses, Link's POWER, and the Runaway Intervention Program. Two interviews were completed with youth that did not complete their program.
- **Post-assessment surveys:** A total of 23 post-assessments were completed with youth from Girls Circle H.E.A.R.T., Hold your Horses, and Link's POWER. Post-assessments were not completed with youth from the Runaway Intervention Program.
- **Focus group:** One focus group was completed with staff representing all four programs.

Findings from interviews

A total of 25 interviews were completed with youth from across the four programs. Similar to the 2015 evaluation¹, the following themes emerged:

- **Safe space:** Youth described feeling safe around other people who have empathy without judgment.
- **Communications:** Youth also described an improved ability to identify and express feelings.
- **Social support and relationships:** Youth shared that programs helped with building relationships and social supports.
- **Self-esteem and self-awareness:** Youth said they improved their ability to better recognize their strengths, including becoming more assertive and self-aware.
- **Well-being:** Youth reported improvements with feelings of sadness and depression.
- **Resilience:** Youth shared their hopes and dreams for the future. Youth described how proud they were to overcome challenges and expressed excitement for future accomplishments, including graduating from high school, continuing to college, getting a job, and helping other youths who may have gone through similar difficulties.

¹ Refer to report: Summary of Findings from DOCCR Programs 2015 Evaluation Report

Emerging themes from 2016 interviews with youth

While many of the interviews revealed similar themes from the previous year, there were some new themes that emerged as well.

Youth made friends or social connections with others in groups.

Youth described how much they value being around other people with a shared background or experiences.

It was cool to be around people who have the same things going on in their life that I do. When you are put in a group of people who have similarities, you can talk.

I like meeting new people and I like the girls here. They are very nice and I feel like they're people that can keep my secrets in what happened to me. I feel like they're my family, kind of. You share a lot together.

Youth also expressed appreciation for programs as a productive way to spend time.

Youth shared that being able to attend programs was helpful and kept them from isolation.

It's helpful to get out of the house and do something. And it's helpful because being on house arrest you can't go anywhere, so at least you get out of the house and be around people.

Youth felt a sense of accomplishment as they finished the programs.

Several youths expressed excitement and felt proud of being able to complete the program.

I am excited that it ended now, we accomplished something that we worked very hard at. I am so happy. I feel like I never finished anything, so now that I am finishing this program I am really happy about it.

Some youth do not want to stop services and would like to continue in more ways.

Other youth shared that they valued the program so much they are sad it is coming to an end.

I am kinda disappointed I have to leave. I hope I can get into more stuff like this, but not too much that it's overwhelming.

It bothers me that it's ending. I wish it could be longer. It really sucks. It's the only thing I look forward to during the week. And losing contact with the girls is going to suck.

A snapshot of how one youth found success after going through multiple cohorts in more than one program

A phone interview was completed with one youth who received services from two DOCCR programs in this study. She described attending one program several times. The youth shared that she did not feel it went well the first time she participated in the program. Though, after attending several more times she felt more positively about the experience including more comfortable about opening up.

I started a year or two ago, and I did it three or four times. The first time it didn't go that well, because everyone else is used to opening up and I wasn't, so I did it again and again, and it was cool... It changed my life to be able to open up.

The probation officer was the primary reason youth participated in the programs.

The youth pointed to her probation officer as the primary reason why she participated in the programs. When asked to describe the strengths in herself, the youth gave the following response:

I'm smart, I'm patient, and I'm responsible. I'm proud of changing my ways, and working on my school and academics and communicating with people more.

Findings from interviews with youth who did not complete the program

Interviews were completed over the phone with two youths who did not complete the program. When asked their reasons for not completing the program, their responses included receiving treatment for chemical dependency, a minor conflict with staff, and physical limitations.

Findings from focus group with staff

A focus group was completed in December 2016 with representatives from the four programs. A total of eight people participated. Program staff were asked to describe the relationships youth had with each other, any barriers or challenges experienced by youth, as well as any challenges and system barriers to implementing programs.

Some of the main opinions that came out of the focus group included:

Youth bonding and resilience

- **Youth bond with others in the program.** The bonding and relationship building described by staff mirrored the findings from interviews with youth. Staff reported that they observed youth expressing care and empathy for one another.
- **Groups helped youth to recognize that they can be advocates.** Similar to the finding from interviews of how youth expressed resilience and a hope to be able to help other girls, staff shared that groups help to transform youth with the opportunities for them to take on leadership roles.

Challenges and barriers

- **Unstable living arrangements.** Similar to past evaluation findings, programs reported challenges in engaging with some youth because of families experiencing transitional housing. The unstable living arrangements create barriers for transportation. Additionally, some youth do not have phones which makes it difficult to stay in contact.
- **A need for clarity about the programs' purposes and services.** As stated in past focus groups, program staff perceive some county referral sources may be unclear about what the programs have to offer or how they run. To help deal with this, program staff shared that they continue to provide presentations helping to create awareness of their programs.
- **Continued inconsistent relationships with county and social workers.** Similar to the previous evaluation, some programs reported challenges with not having a specific point person at the county who is dedicated to working with them. These inconsistent working relationships create barriers to effective collaboration and communication between the program and the county. One of the four program did not experience this barrier.
- **County reporting requirements.** Some programs shared that they spend a significant amount of time reporting to the county. Additionally, some program staff felt that timelines for reporting are not always reasonable and are often requested with a sense of urgency. Programs with fewer staff and limited capacity felt that these requests are strenuous.

Considerations and recommendations

- **Better understanding of systemic trauma and oppression.** Program staff pointed to a need for more understanding of how youth experience trauma from being involved in the justice and human service systems. In addition to the likelihood of having adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), the systemic racism and experience of being involved in the justice system furthers exacerbate the mental health issues of youth. Staff pointed to systemic issues as being interrelated with adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and its impact on youth's mental health.
- **Self-care for program staff.** Program staff expressed a need for training to help them prevent burnout and turnover. Staff explained that self-care training will contribute to staff sustainability and long-term success for youth.

Post-assessment findings

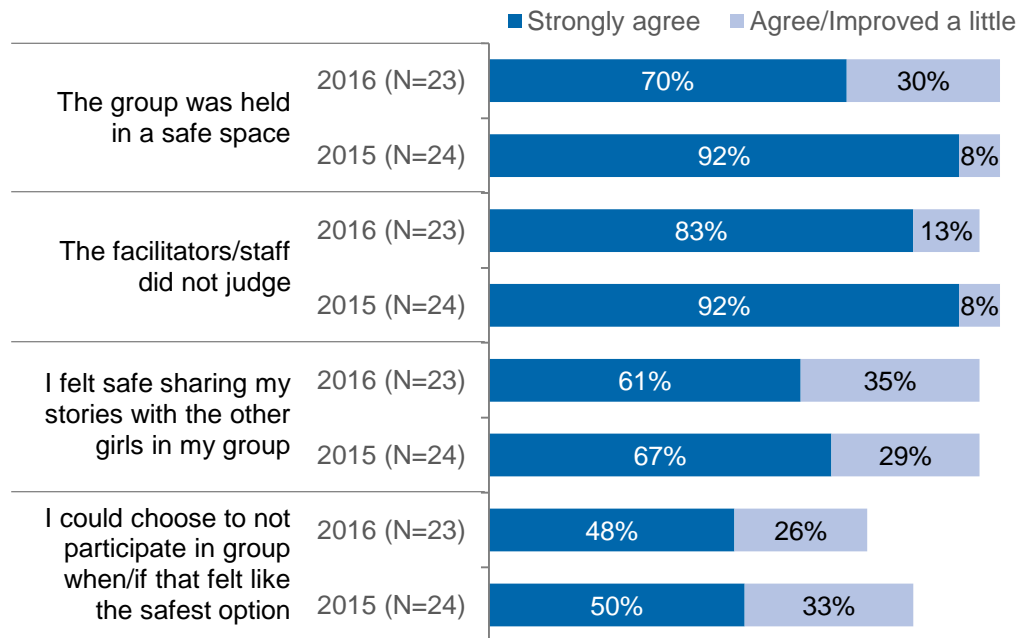
In both 2015 and 2016, youth were asked to complete a post survey² to capture information about their feelings around safety, communication, home life, relationships, self-esteem, well-being and resilience.

The following section summarizes results from post-assessments. The charts include data from data collected in both 2015³ and 2016. Given the small number of respondents, findings should be interpreted with caution and are not intended for comparison of the various programs participating in the evaluation.

Safe space with empathy and no judgement

For both years, youth who completed the survey felt that the groups were held in a safe space. In 2016, almost all of the youth who completed the survey felt that the facilitators or staff did not judge them (96%). Similarly, 96 percent of youth in both years, felt safe sharing stories with others in the group. Almost three-quarters of youth in 2016 felt that they could choose to not participate in the group when or if that felt like the safest option (74%; Figure 1).

1. Percentage of youth reporting feelings of safety in programs



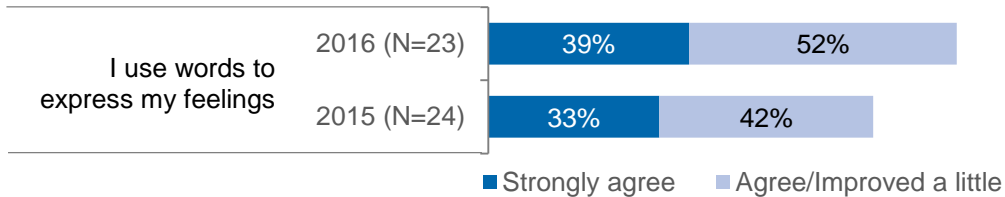
² Due to the nature of the program, RIP participants were not asked to participate in this part of the evaluation.

³ Please note that in 2015, four participants repeated the Hold Your Horses program more than once. There may be duplicate responses in the results, as post-assessments were conducted with all participants at the end of the program.

Communication skills and connecting with others

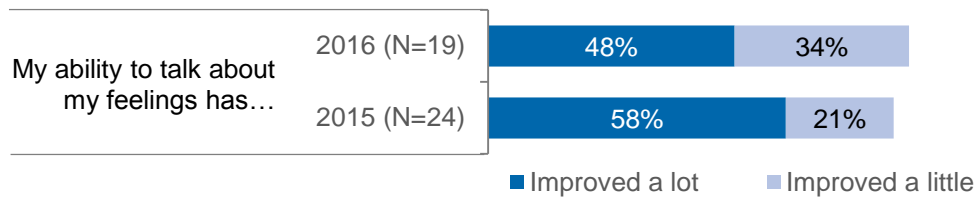
In 2016, 91 percent of youth respondents reported that they use words to express their feelings (Figure 2).

2. Percentage of youth reporting use of words to express feelings



Over eight in ten 2016 youth who completed the post-assessment reported that their ability to talk about their feelings has improved (82%; Figure 3).

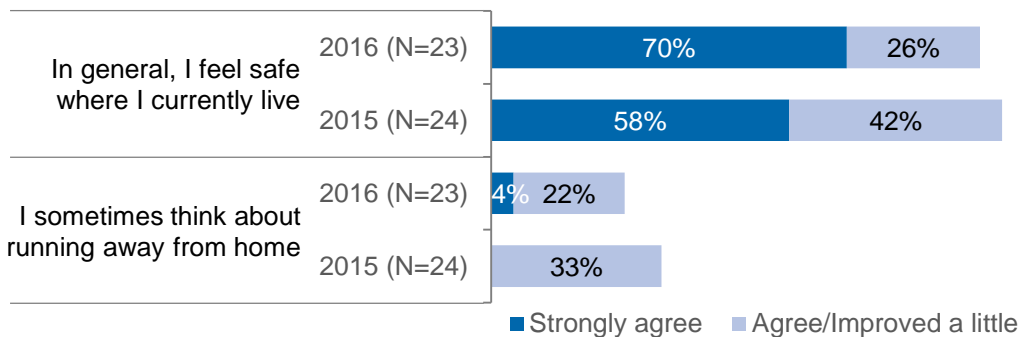
3. Youth ratings on ability to talk about feelings



Situations at home

Almost all youth in 2016 reported that they felt safe where they currently live (96%) and about one in four 2016 youth sometimes think about running away from home (26%; Figure 4).

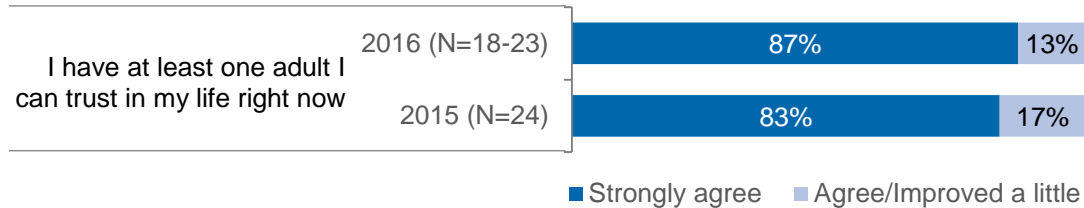
4. Percentage of youth reporting feelings of safety at home and thoughts of running away



Social support and relationships

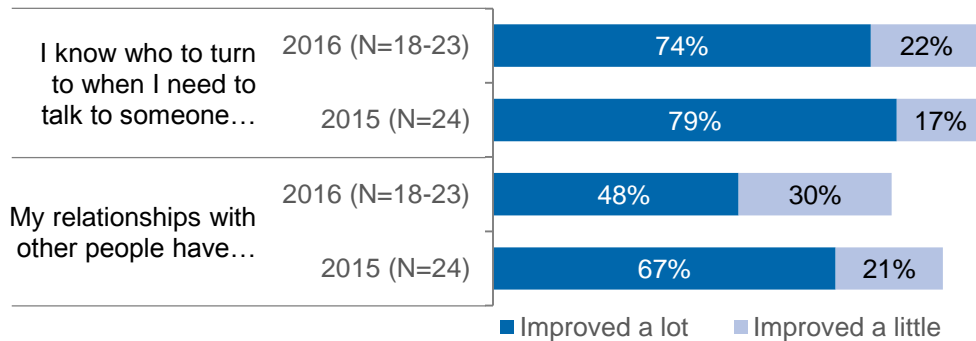
All youth in both years reported that they have at least one adult that they can trust in their life (Figure 5).

5. Percentage of youth reporting having a trusted adult in their life



Almost all youth in 2016 reported that they know who to turn to when they need someone to talk to (96%). Over three-quarters of 2016 youth reported that their relationships with other people have improved (78%; Figure 6).

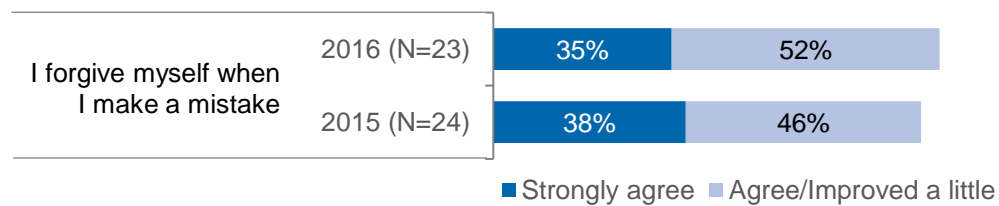
6. Youth ratings on knowing who to talk to and relationships with others



Self-esteem and self-awareness

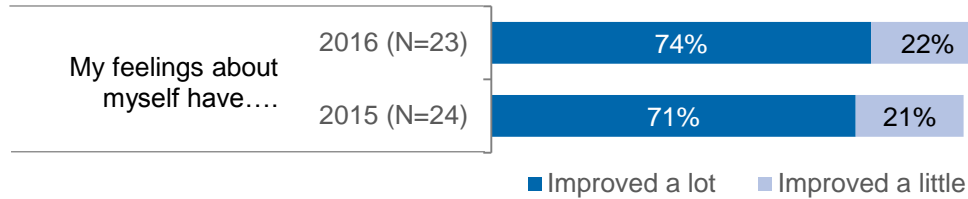
Eighty-seven percent of youth who completed the post-assessment in 2016 reported that they forgive themselves when they make a mistake (Figure 7).

7. Percentage of youth reporting that they forgive themselves when they make a mistake



Almost all youth in 2016 reported that their feelings about themselves have improved (96%, Figure 8).

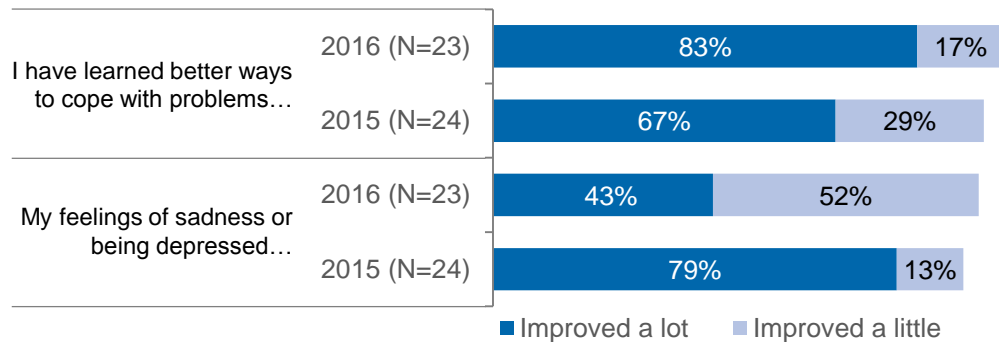
8. Youth ratings on feelings about self



Well-being

All youth in 2016 reported that they have learned better ways to cope with problems. Almost all 2016 youth reported that their feelings of sadness or being depressed has improved (95%; Figure 9).

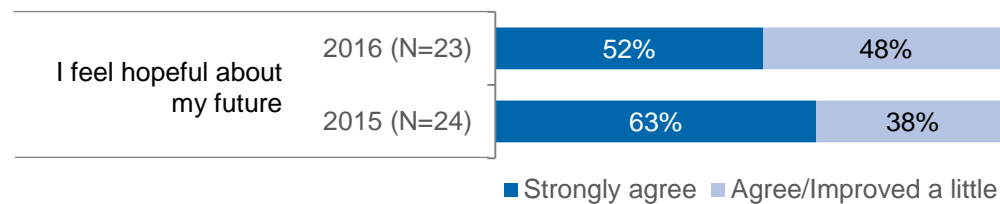
9. Youth ratings on ability to cope and feelings of sadness or being depressed



Resilience

All youth in both years reported feeling hopeful about their future (Figure 10).

10. Percentage of youth reporting feeling hopeful about their future



Note: Data may exceed 100% due to rounding.

Next steps for 2017

The 2017 evaluation will continue some of the efforts that began in 2015, including interviewing participants of Girls Circle H.E.A.R.T, Hold Your Horses, and the Link's POWER program. We also plan to continue to do the post-assessment test with participants from all three programs. Because the RIP program conducts its own evaluation, it will not be part of the 2017 evaluation.

Additionally, interviews and/or a web survey of county staff who refer youth to these programs will be conducted and/or administered. The purpose of collecting information from the referral sources will be to gather perceptions from probation officers and county social workers about how the programs benefit the youth they work with (and areas for growth or improvement).

To supplement what we learn from youth interviews and post-assessments, we will also conduct a focus group with the Link's POWER Program's Youth Advisory Committee, called the VOICE (Vision of Intelligence Creating Equity) Committee. The POWER Program is co-designed by the VOICE.

We will also revise consents to ask for permission to contact participants in the future, to prepare for learning about any lasting impacts of the program.