



Report on the Status of Girls in the Commonwealth and Related Recommendations

Massachusetts Commission on the Status of Women
June 2021



“We all experienced something similar and that in itself is a connection already; forming communities from little stories we have told is something that is so powerful”

(Roundtable Participant)

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Table of Contents

Introduction	4
Executive Summary	5
Overview	7
Girl Findings	10
Girls' Own Voices	13
Provider Findings	20
Regional Women's Commission Engagement with Girls	22
Pending Legislation Advancing the Status of Girls + Youth	24
Areas for Immediate Action + Additional Inquiry	26
Appendix A: FY21 Survey for Girls	28
Appendix B: FY21 Provider Survey	32

Introduction

The mission of the *Massachusetts Commission on the Status of Women* (MCSW) is to provide a permanent, effective voice for women and girls across Massachusetts. The Commission stands for fundamental freedoms, basic human rights and the full enjoyment of life for all women and girls throughout their lives. The MCSW is composed of 19 volunteer commissioners who are appointed by the Governor, the Senate President, the Speaker of the House, and the Caucus of Women Legislators and three staff members. The Commission offers its sincere thanks to these appointing authorities, the other members of the Legislature, as well as the Administration for their ongoing support.

The Commission's goals in this project are to report information on the status of girls during the pandemic and thereafter, beyond recovery. We aim to release an informed policy and programming agenda that can be shared with commissioners, partners, and legislators; and to coordinate and encourage the expansion of girl-focused programming, support, and advocacy, with the continued centering and amplification of girls' voices.

The Commission is committed to working with regional and municipal women's commissions and non-profit partners to organize listening sessions centering girls' voices across the Commonwealth. This project builds on work conducted in the spring of 2020, which provided an invaluable base of knowledge about girls' experience during the COVID-19 pandemic. Current information gathering has provided a deeper understanding and will guide future Commission work in this area.

This report was made possible thanks to funding provided by the Boston Women's Fund. BWF is a progressive foundation that supports initiatives run by women and girls in order to create a society based on racial, economic and social justice. Funding provided by BWF enabled the Commission to engage young women as researchers and writers for this initiative.

The Commission is grateful for the partnership of the following organizations:

ASPIRE, Big Sister Association of Greater Boston, Boston Centers for Youth and Families, Boston Glow, Boston Women's Fund, Chica Project, Dream Big!, Edward Kennedy Institute, Flying Cloud Institute, Girls' Club of Greenfield, Girls Inc. of Lowell, Girls Inc. of Lynn, Girls Inc. of Taunton, Girls Inc. of the Berkshires, Girls Inc. of the Valley, Girls Inc. of Worcester, Girls LEAP, Girls on the Run, Heart and Soul Western MA, Girls Rock Campaign Boston, GRLZ Radio, Girl Scouts of Central and Western Mass, Girl Scouts of Eastern MA, I Have a Future, Investing in Girls Alliance, Massachusetts Girls State: American Legion Auxiliary, Mayor's Office of Women's Advancement, Middlesex District Attorney's Office, Rights of Passage and Empowerment, Science Club for Girls, Strong Women Strong Girls, Title IX Girls Running Club, Today's Girl Tomorrow's Woman, Vital Village Community Engagement Network, WAM Theater, Women's Fund of Western Massachusetts, Youth Options Unlimited Boston, YW Boston, YWCA SEMA.

Executive Summary

2021 has been a dynamic year in the Commonwealth amidst the evolution of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many young people have had limited exposure to peers and support services while navigating the challenges of online learning. In this tumultuous environment, the Massachusetts Commission on the Status of Women sought to understand the issues relevant to girls in the Commonwealth.


The Commission gathered information through **listening sessions conducted over zoom** and **an online survey** in order to reach a diverse set of girls' experiences across the state. This report categorizes and presents the insights of these girls, in addition to policy recommendations and areas for future inquiry based upon the ideas presented.

Although many perspectives and suggestions were voiced, several themes emerged as paramount issues of concern to girl-identified and non-binary youth during the COVID-19 pandemic:

- The majority of girls reported **diminished self esteem and self confidence**, which was exacerbated by a lack of access to mental and physical health services.
 - **72.6% of survey respondents indicated that self-esteem/self-confidence was most impacted by COVID-19**
 - **32.1% of survey respondents stated that since the pandemic**, they have had challenges accessing mental health services
- Girls also noted a **decline in healthy personal relationships** as well as a rise in cyberbullying and body-shaming.
- In the absence of schools, extracurricular activities and other networks due to COVID-19, girls struggled to find support. Many girls cited the **need for an increase in support groups** such as after-school programs, mentorship, and identity based groups.
- Within school, girls also noted a **frustration with school curricula including a lack of representation of girls' intersecting identities and a disregard for the histories and contributions of marginalized communities**.

There were also productive strategies or examples of resiliency that the girls communicated.

- Support networks and girl-specific programming were most frequently cited as resources that had a positive impact. Girls expressed an interest in the growth of



this type of programming (ex. arts therapy, mentorship) and the number of available programs.

- Girls noted that positive and regular peer-to-peer communications improved their self-esteem and feelings of connection to community.

In response to these findings, the Commission commits to the following intentional work to maintain adequate progress toward advancing the status of girl-identified youth in the Commonwealth:

- Continued and consistent research
- Attentive reviewing and endorsing of public policy that will address girl-identified youth
- Pursuing opportunities for girl-identified youth engagement and leadership with the Commission and regional women' commissions

The Commission further proposes areas for additional inquiry and engagement:

- Opportunities for increased funding for girl programming
- Explore critically the disproportionate disciplinary treatment of girls, girls of color, and non-binary youth in school
- Expand equitable access to resources for mental health, sexual assault awareness, and health education
- Intentional spaces for girl-led advocacy

The Commission on the Status of Women is committed to amplifying girls' voices and supporting organizations dedicated to serving girls. The Commission offers these findings to help inform policy decisions relative to girls and uplift the future leaders of the Commonwealth.

Overview

Evolution

In keeping with its mission to collect information on the status of women and girls, the Commission committed to hosting a series of listening sessions and conducting a survey focused on girls' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Background

Through this project, it is the intention of the Commission to respond, give a voice to our girls and, offer well-informed recommendations as programs and policies are being developed to meet the needs of the girls of Massachusetts. Particular effort was made to include regional commissions on the status of women and non-profit partners whose own missions serve girls of the Commonwealth. The work of the individual regional women's commissions in the area of girls engagement is discussed later in this report.

The Survey

As part of the *Girls Initiative*, a survey was created to accompany and amplify the voices of roundtable participants. Questions were centered around topics raised earlier in the planning process by both girls and partnering service agencies. In each topic area, respondents were specifically asked if the challenges they faced on a regular basis had been exacerbated, improved, or changed by COVID-19.

The Sessions

In April, the Commission held five hours of moderated listening sessions that were, to the greatest extent possible, girl-led, while welcoming those ages 13 through 22 to participate. In some cases, sessions were broken out by age or topic, but in all sessions the articulate, thoughtful voices of girls from across the Commonwealth discussed concerns over self-care, mental health, education, relationships, and financial well-being.

Methodology

Sessions were conducted on the Zoom platform, with conversation led by a moderator and assisted by a silent proctor/facilitator/producer who monitored security, contributed conversation prompts and led a parallel chat. Survey data was collected via a companion survey on the Google forms platform. A total of 98 girls both participated in a session and completed the survey. The data set is a small sampling, however the common threads found in the statements of girls across geographic and economic lines show some

universality. **In that spirit, this report has attempted to share, as space allows, the direct words of the girls of the Commonwealth.**

Throughout the report the term “girl(s)” includes individuals ages 13-22 for the intents and purposes of the Commission and the *Girls Initiative*. This includes: young people assigned female sex at birth and align with its socially gendered form, those who are non-conformative and non-binary, and members of the LGBTQ+ community who identify with the girl gender but may not have been assigned female sex at birth. This working definition allows for a more inclusive understanding as it pertains to our findings and the participants of the *Girls Initiative*. Likewise, the term “young woman” refers to female youth, while the term girl-identifying youth is all encompassing and will serve the same purpose as “girl” as outlined previously. These definitions are applied intentionality in the effort to uphold the MCSW’s commitment to inclusivity, which effectively advances and centers all women’s voices regardless of gender/sex assigned at birth.

As discussed later on, the use of the term ‘provider’ refers to an organization that serves girls ages 13 to 22 years old by offering programming or other services. This narrow working definition allows our findings to be better aligned with those who participated in roundtable discussion sessions and surveys. Organizations identified as providers were asked to engage in the Girl’s Initiative by completing a survey or participating in an interview inquiring about the programming or services which cater to girls. Subsequently, it is important to note that providers who responded to the survey or participated in informational interviews may serve a broader age range of girls than those captured by the *Girls Initiative* survey and interviews. Moreover, the information gathered and being evaluated includes but is not limited to, demographics of girl participants, types of programming offered, and the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on girls supported by providers.

As providers work closely with the target audience of the *Girls Initiative*, their insights supplement the Commission’s findings in assessing the needs, concerns, and overall status of girls across the Commonwealth, because providers work closely with the target audience of the *Girls Initiative*. Moreover, their services often address existing issues that impact girls. Accordingly, assessing the programming and challenges faced by girl-serving organizations can uncover new and prevailing issues that policy interventions can greatly improve.



Challenges

It is clear that the virtual Zoom platform both limited access for some and increased it for others. A key challenge moving forward will be to diversify the program into providing both in-person opportunities, as originally envisioned, and virtual opportunities, which offered benefits that might not otherwise have been recognized.

Secondarily, growing and maintaining relationships with the girls of the Commonwealth is going to be an integral part of ensuring that future programming, in whatever form, is met with a positive response.

Recommendations

A significant portion of the participants expressed strong interest in having a part in both future advocacy on the concerns they had raised, and in receiving mentorship and guidance. The MCSW is committed to building on the foundation work of this first *Girls Initiative* with the inclusion of girl-centered advocacy as part of its 2021 priorities.

Girl Findings

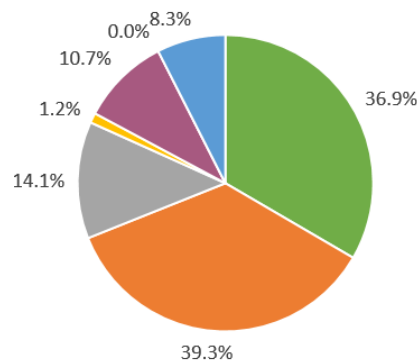
Demographics

The combined data from the survey and the roundtables **included the voices of 98 girls. 84 voices were survey respondents, and 14 were Roundtable participants.** Collectively, **the Initiative reached 40 communities across the Commonwealth.**

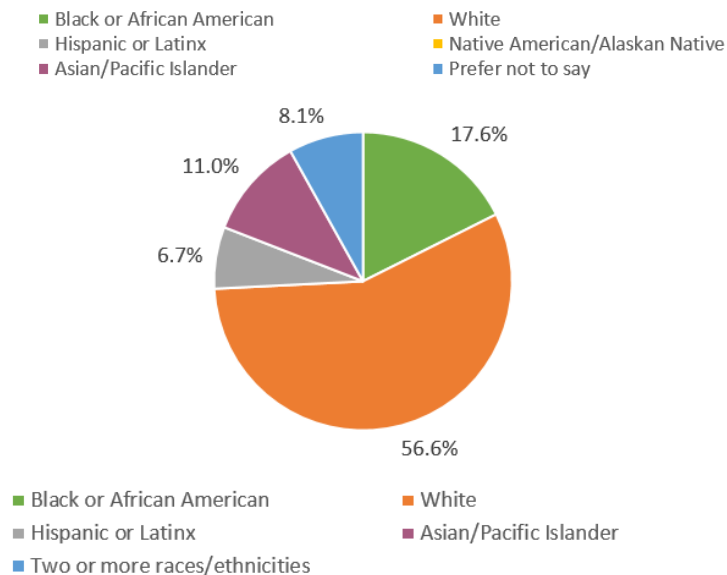
Survey Respondents reside in the following communities: Arlington, Assonet, Auburn, Bedford, Belchertown, Belmont, Brighton, Canton, Chelsea, Chicopee, Dorchester, East Boston, Framingham, Halifax, Holden, Holyoke, Hyde Park, Jamaica Plain, Kingston, Lawrence, Littleton, Lynn, Malden, Marlborough, Mattapan, Medfield, Medford, Mendon, Milton, Pittsfield, Randolph, Roxbury, Saugus, South Boston, Springfield, Sturbridge, Upton, Waltham, Westwood, Worcester

Racial + Ethnic Identity

2021

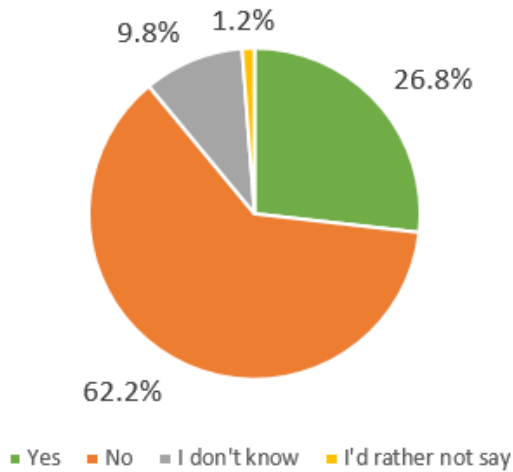


2020

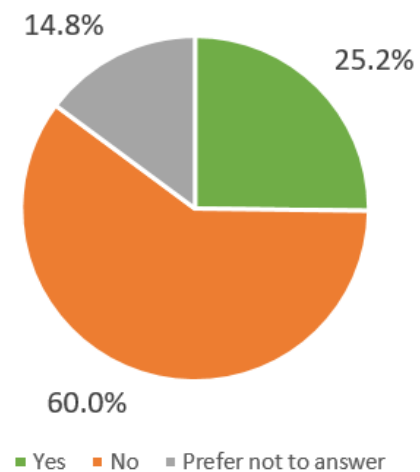


LGBTQ+ Community

2021



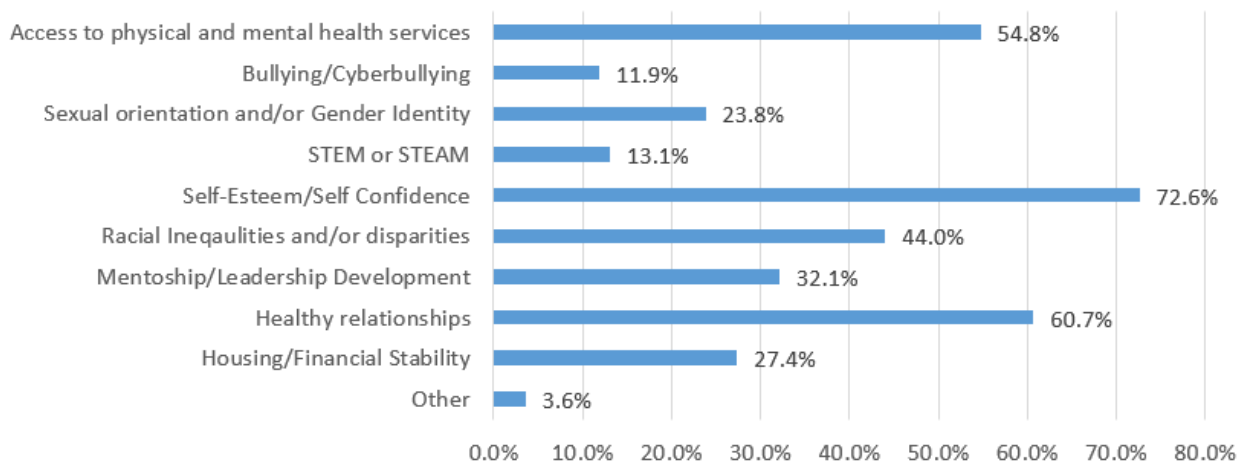
2020



Summative Priorities

Open-Ended Survey Responses

Which of these topics do you believe have been most impacted for you since COVID-19? (check all that apply)



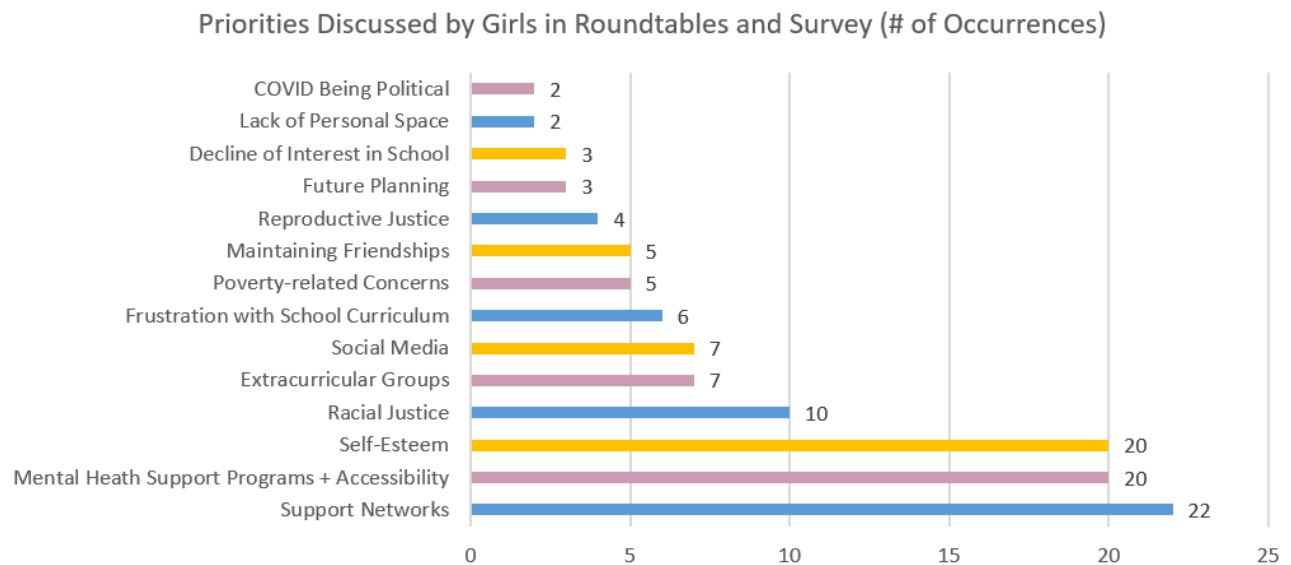
The top three most impacted topics—self-esteem/self-confidence, healthy relationships, and access to physical and mental health services—reflect how saturated the roundtables

were with discussions of the importance of support networks and mental health support groups for girls in the Commonwealth. Girls explained these networks manifest as safe-space girl groups to discuss tribulations, LGBTQ+ support groups, support and resources from school faculty, spaces that foster solidarity, and extracurricular programming.

In response to the prompt, “What services or programs would you like to see in your community that you feel would be beneficial to your success and well-being?” participants named the following support networks:

- Mentorship initiatives
 - Big Sister Little Sister
 - Strong Women, Strong Girls
 - Showstoppers
- After school programs
 - Calming art program groups (music, visual arts, dance, etc.)
 - Positive affirmation youth group
- Therapy services
 - Through school for those who cannot afford a therapist

Priorities Discussed by Girls in Roundtables and Survey



Girls' Own Voices

Support Networks

During the roundtables, discussions ranged from disappointment in the efficacy of some support groups as well as the power of female solidarity and its various manifestations.

"We should engage in discourse about allyship and intersectionality, for this particular age group is dealing with issues [adults are] not familiar with"

The girls stressed the importance of forging relationships with others in a time when girls are bombarded with social expectations, beauty standards, and sometimes "harmful comments" from adults, (13-17 Participant). Allyship among women and girls specifically emerged as a crucial component for "when you are feeling like an outlier" (18-22 Participant).

"When my mom used to pack Indian food for me, I remember putting it on my lap so no one would see it [...] this girl came up to her and said you look beautiful and that changed her perspective"

Additionally, solidarity and allyship provides a space for validation of experiences. One testifier shared the benefits of discussions with other girls about social expectations as it is

"Clubs can showcase that solidarity is needed to stop the stigma that is put against women having to always compete against each other"

"somewhat helpful to hear they're experiencing the same stuff." Individuals also shared their desire to not just be heard but to "be the person that is there to help and listen." Most girls shared an experience about their change in perspective as a result of girls' support (18-22 Participant).

One participant articulated that "building a community helps contribute to building active conversation," and that often that community can formatively shape their identity (18-22 Participant).

"[Clubs] can change the social shackles we are put into as little girls"

The communities most impactful for girls were extracurricular activities, work, and friendship. Girls explained that it is in those communities that they find the most joy and fulfillment. One participant noted that "when you find a subject you find in school that

you want to continue your growth, it is a really magical thing" (13-17 Participant).

Additionally, communities and clubs serve as a platform to "practice speaking out loud and sharing what I believe in" which shapes girls' confidence, identity, and purpose (13-17 Participant). The girls' emphasis on programming reinforces advocacy for robust programming to bolster passion and solidarity in girl communities across the Commonwealth.

"I think that my town should have a committee directly in town that addresses specific concerns for young female identifying citizens"

Mental Health Support Programs + Resources

32.1% of survey respondents stated that since the pandemic, they have had challenges accessing mental health services. Furthermore, within the roundtables and the open-ended prompt in the survey, girls discussed the need for support networks, mental health support programs, and self-esteem 62 times. Obstacles ranged from the lack of availability, accessibility, and consistency of mental health support, which has inhibited the girls' ability to heal and grow from the damaging experiences during the pandemic. For example, one participant lamented that "when remote, there are a lot fewer places to talk because it's hard; you have to wait for another week before you can truly talk about your problems," and that it "feels like school should have more of a support system for kids that are really struggling" (13-17 Participants).

"Not everyone [can] afford professional mental health consultation/has access to it at all. It would be nice to see something beneficial that everyone has access to, which I get is difficult. Even if you don't struggle with an official diagnosis, you can still go through difficult times. Personally, my guidance counselor has never been helpful in that department so I wish I'd have actual access to someone that can help, excluding family and friends"

41.5% of responses to the question, "What services or programs would you like to see in your community that you feel would be beneficial to your success and well-being?" **advocated for increased mental health resources across schools and the Commonwealth.** Often, respondents shared that the financial burden of mental health services prevents individuals from receiving necessary support.

In addition to standard mental health resources, it is essential that there be a specific “physical safe space” to discuss inequality, racial injustice, gender identity, and sexual assault.” Within public schools, two survey respondents specified the need for “better” and “consistent” mental health providers that “look like me.” Therefore, mental health providers must understand the intersections of oppressions that girls face. **54.8% of survey respondents indicated that access to mental health services has been most impacted by COVID-19, yet the voices at the roundtables indicate that COVID-19 merely exacerbated a pre-existing systemic problem of accessibility to mental health resources.**

Self-Esteem + Bullying

“I wish I treated myself better; there was a lot of external pressure being black and essentially to hate myself”

72.6% of survey respondents indicated that self-esteem/self-confidence was most impacted by COVID-19, 11.9% higher than the next highest responses. This significant finding was reinforced by shared anecdotes during the roundtables. The anecdotes' overall theme included a heightened standard of womanhood these girls expect for themselves.

“The thing about teenagers is you’re always comparing; if you try to fix too many things at once, it is way too overwhelming”

The girls stated their self-esteem was/is shaped by social media, COVID-19, and comparisons to other women and girls. The girls expressed a desire for better avenues to report bullying and gender-based discrimination that does not penalize girls about the time in which they reported an issue or the features they possess.

Girls reflected on the detrimental effects of social media, with many participants echoing the sentiment “I’m trying to take a break from social media; my self-esteem has definitely gone down” (13-17 Participant).

“It’s really hard when you have all these standards around you to figure out and balance all of that and figure out what’s right for me”

When asked why girls think social media can be so damaging, girls responded with myriad possibilities. One participant stated

“Never a right answer; always people that are judging especially when it comes to your body”

that she has observed that users of social media are “being emboldened to bully other people on the internet” (13-17 Participant). This bullying includes body-shaming, religious intolerance, racism, and other microaggressions. Girls shared that the tension-filled discourse on social media impacts self-esteem because “when people keep harping on you to do something, you feel like you have to listen to these other voices”(13-17 Participant).

“There is a trend of group thinking [...] creating a culture of exclusion”

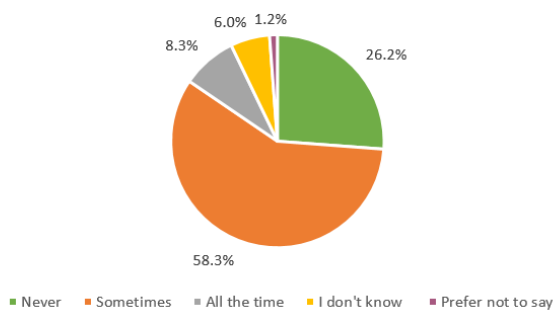
Girls explained that “social media always highlights the ‘perfect’ part of people’s lives, not the struggle,” which polarizes potential solidarity, allyship, and support, “when so many people say it at once, you start to think, ‘oh that’s true” (13-17 Participants). Thus, support groups and clubs that reinforce female solidarity prove extremely crucial. Girls advocated for these resources to be institutionalized to help mitigate the negative effects of social media, especially in light of COVID-19.

“I think that my town should have a committee directly in town that addresses specific concerns for young female identifying citizens”

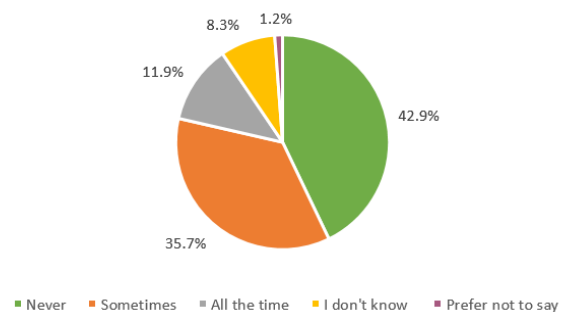
Racial, Reproductive, Educational Justice

The survey and roundtables offered a space for girls to reflect on their intersectional identities. The girls discussed their experiences through their identity as a woman and/or girl, person of color, member of the LGBTQ+ community, and/or religious membership. In light of the elevated conversations regarding racial inequality occurring in the country. The girls reflected on the prevalence of controversial opinions on social media as well as personal experiences with identity-based prejudice. 47.6% of respondents stated they felt they are treated differently because of their racial or ethnic identity. 66.6% of respondents

How often do you believe you are treated differently because of your gender identity?



How often do you believe you are treated differently because of your racial or ethnic identity?



felt they are treated differently because of their gender identity. Participants in the roundtables echoed such grievances.

"These prejudices exist deep in the hearts and minds of these people [...] not sure if cyberspace and these platforms are the best places for these issues regarding the younger demographics"

Girls voiced frustration with the treatment of topics such as sexual assault, dress code, and menstruation in the Commonwealth and in school communities. The girls stated that "the dress code is derogatory toward young girls," for **"if a teacher is being sexually aroused by knees, I am not the problem"** (13-17 Participants).

"Period poverty and pink tax needs to be destigmatized"

Girls indicated that they do not feel safe or comfortable sharing incidents of sexual assault because of the associated stigma, administrative hinderances, and general lack of awareness: "it is so disgusting how people aren't educated on this and don't take it as seriously as they should" (13-17 Participant).

One participant declared that "sexual assault has an expiration date" in which survivors are often neglected if too long a time has passed since the incident (13-17 Participant). Schools and other institutions in the Commonwealth should explore streamlining sexual assault support networks so that in any circumstance, girls have support and accessibility to such resources.

When reflecting on newfound understandings of identity and justice, girls recognized the holes in their various educational upbringings. The frustrations often overlap with the lack of support networks regarding racial, LGBTQ+, reproductive justice, and more.

"I found most of my love for advocacy came from famous women books from mom; learned a lot about different issues from social media, reading the news; I never learned from school; I'm lucky that mom was an outside source that inspired me to reach up and fight for my dreams"

"I'd love to see more queer-inclusive spaces, specifically surrounding LGBTQIA+ books, television, and other forms of representation. Like a production of an altered version of a beloved play where some of the characters or the storyline is queer, and more diverse books required in our schools' curriculums. I also think discussions about diversity and acceptance, such as culture fairs (mandatory in attendance and during school hours) where LGBTQIA+, POC, women, and all sorts of other diverse groups can showcase their cultures, traditions, beliefs, and values with others. I think it would really help us all understand each other, but it wouldn't stress students out too much. It would also be awesome if we participated in the Privilege Race, Challenge Day (Cross The Line), Jubilee's Middle Ground & Spectrum series, Cut's Lineup series, and NewHope Church's 'Don't Put People In Boxes' exercise"

Furthermore, girls shared frustration with the school curriculums' lack of attentiveness to inclusion of girls' intersectional identities. Participants shared a desire for more diverse spaces to educate and discuss topics pertinent to various identities.

"I hope we have more programs that help translate or assist people with language barriers. For example, more phone line availability for Chinese speakers"

"Needs to be education, because it is one thing to give support, but there needs to be better education (ADL training), needs to be a part of the curriculum; they do not teach you about Africa outside of colonialism; only learn about the Holocaust slightly in World History; [...] it needs to start younger"

"I would like to see more internships and professional opportunities made available to young women of color in urban areas. Many young women like myself encounter obstacles when trying to compete for job opportunities that aren't in service industries such as in healthcare, corporate, STEM and leadership"

Other Concerns

In addition to the themes detailed above, the following concerns were also mentioned during roundtable discussions:

- **The Decline in Interest/Motivation for School**
 - “Feels harder to wake up in the morning when you are at home all the time”
- **Lack of Personal Space**
 - Because of COVID-19 and being at home ... “everyone is always there; there is not a lot of emotional space”
- **COVID-19 Political Frustrations**
 - “I can’t believe they are reversing the mask mandates.
 - “Why is it so hard to get a vaccine?”
 - “What else do you need other than the case/death count?”

Provider Findings

Overview

The *Girls Initiative* provider survey received a total of 19 responses, with 17 providers serving both young women and girl-identifying youth. Moreover, approximately 68% of providers do not serve young parents, expectant parents, or caregivers, making their services exclusively for young girls. Most of these girls do not exceed the age of 18, leaving approximately 21% of providers who do offer programming for young parents, expectant parents, or caregivers.

Key Themes

The following assesses the topics providers discussed and included in their programming prior to and during the coronavirus pandemic. Capturing the topics that were brought about reveals how girl-centered programming has evolved since the start of the pandemic while addressing areas that exacerbated existing needs for girls.

When evaluating the most discussed topics providers included as a part of regular programming or a specific event, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, **Self Esteem or Self Confidence** was the highest selection with 17 of 19 providers choosing it. That was closely followed by **Mentorship and Leadership Development**, with 15 out of 19 providers making this selection. The next highest selected topics were tied, each receiving 13 selections, these include **Healthy Relationships, STEM or STEAM, Racial Inequalities and Disparities**, and finally, **Bullying or Cyberbullying**.

Programming during COVID-19

Results illustrated that topics discussed by providers with girls as a part of regular programming shifted in many areas. While **Self Esteem or Self Confidence** received the highest collective number of selections again, the topic area did not lead by the same margins as providers indicated in pre-COVID-19 discussion topics, as it received 13 selections by providers as compared to the previous 17.

The topic area that closely followed received the same number of selections with 12 providers. These included **Healthy Relationships, COVID-19**, and **Access to Physical and finally Mental Health Services** which had 11 selections. Undoubtedly, the types of programming offered by providers to girls were impacted as topics significantly shifted in the effort to adjust their operations and accommodate the needs being observed from girls. The most prevalent concerns were situated in personal or interpersonal issues, and

basic physical and emotional needs. Simply, COVID-19 exposed pre existing gaps that were being unmet within the Commonwealth, as these findings suggest that girls desired more services that promoted social, emotional and personal health and wellbeing.

Providers were asked if they conducted programming virtually, in-person, over the phone, or used a combination of these formats. Of the 19 provider respondents, 11 indicated that programming was shifted heavily towards virtual formats with limited in-person components making their operations *hybrid*. One provider wrote, "A quick pivot to virtual in March 2020. More in-person, outdoors as restrictions eased. A combo of both presently," illustrating how many providers adapted their operations as a result of the pandemic in accordance with public health mandates.

It is important to note that mandates, recommendations, and policies relative to COVID-19 changed throughout the course of the pandemic. Consequently, providers had to stay informed in regards to the pandemic as the structure of their operations relied heavily upon the policy restrictions and the prevalence of the virus at any given time. Doing so allowed them to safely offer services to girls while observing public health restrictions that limited in-person programming.

In addition, 7 providers indicated that all programming had been shifted fully virtual, leaving a single provider indicating their offering in-person programming during COVID-19. A result of such everchanging and extenuating circumstances, providers encountered logistical and capacity challenges in the attempts to continue to offer programming and meet the needs of the girls they are serving.

Key Takeaways

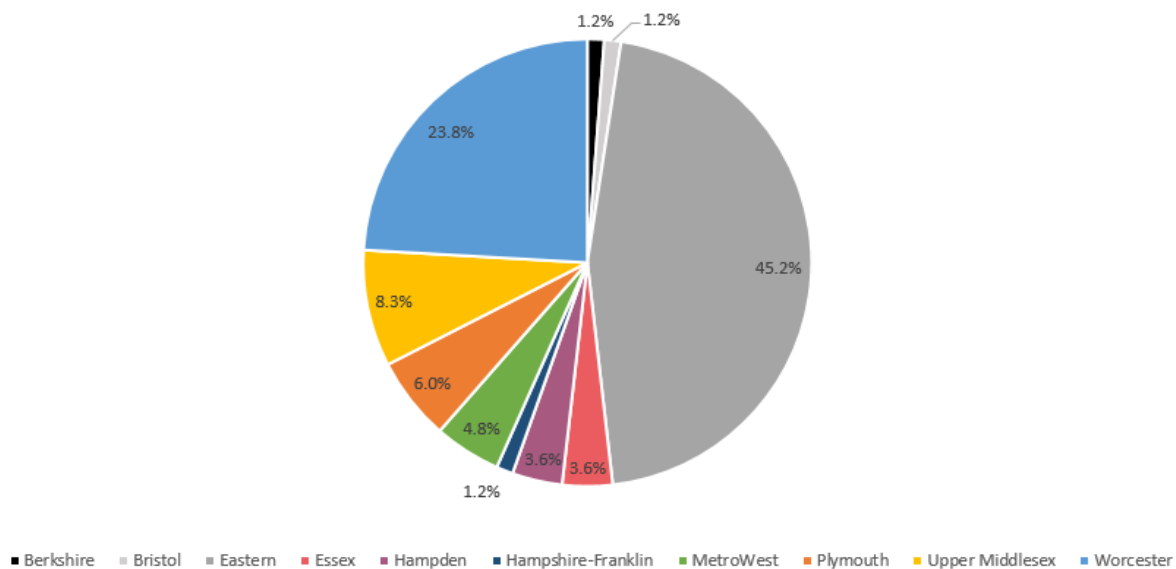
Consequently, when polled about the community based services they refer girls to, 9 providers indicated **Mental Health Services** and **Behavioral Health Services** as frequently utilized. The next notable and utilized provider referrals were to **Sexual and Reproductive Health Services**. Finally, 9 providers indicated that they made no referrals to any community based organizations. This aligns with the information gathered from girl voices during our listening sessions as many spoke to the need for more accessible and improved mental health services, emotional development, and girl support networks or solidarity groups. Accordingly, **36.8% of providers had recognized an increase in requests for the services their respective organizations offer**. The results of this line of questioning further substantiates what has been recognized as areas imperative to the

advancement of girls in Massachusetts, those being, interpersonal development and programming, and access to essential mental and physical health services.


Regional Women’s Commission Engagement with Girls

While not all regional women’s commissions have engaged with girls and *Girls Initiative* in the same capacity, all commissions demonstrate a heightened interest in elevating girls' voices and providing programming. To do so, some regional women’s commissions including Berkshire, Bristol, and Metro-West have independently held listening sessions which create a space and platform for girls to engage directly with the commissions. Similarly, many regional women’s commissions have endorsed legislation relevant to the advancement of girls in the Commonwealth such as Bristol, Metro-West, Upper Middlesex.

Respondents' Correlating Regional Commission



Metro-West’s Athena Council proves a template for other regional women’s commissions to emulate, for Chairs of the Cape & Islands and Berkshire noted the desire to follow the framework of the Athena Council. The Council is committed to amplifying the voices of girls in the Metro-West region with a focus on making sure resources available to young people are easily accessible, readily available, and reflect and respect identities of young people. The Council hosted its first ever listening circle (17 attendees) and focused on the challenges facing AAPI girls and turning that theme into a larger conversation. The Metro-West Regional Chair, Heather Panahi, shared that goals for the council going forward



include deeper engagement with legislators to hear their perspectives and share on respective networks to hopefully introduce legislators to constituents. Panahi also shared a general goal to continue building the initiative to reach more girls.

The Berkshire Chair, Dana Rasso, shared a similar sentiment in that the Commission hosted a **listening session** in February 2020. Commissions expressed the desire to host more listening sessions, strengthen networks with local providers, and increase collaboration with MCSW. Anna Noble Dunphy of the Cape & Islands Commission emphasized that the regional liaison is really crucial, for it is helpful to have conduit to the state. She shared that partnership between regionals is growing which indicates the necessity for increased funding to reinforce and maintain that conduit. Furthermore, the Commission intends to pursue an internship program in conjunction with partnering with organizations focussed on targeting the needs of girls such as League of Women Voters and the Cape Women's Coalition.

The regional women's commissions wish to increase collaboration with legislators to best address the needs of girls in the Commonwealth. The ultimate goal surrounds sharing respective networks to introduce legislators to constituents as well as working to make sure resources available to young people are easily accessible, readily available, reflect and respect identities of young people.

Pending Legislation Advancing the Status of Girls+Youth

The following legislation has been identified as related to, supporting, or advancing the status of girls in the Commonwealth, yet the MCSW recognizes that this is not an exhaustive list. Furthermore, it is important to note that while much of this legislation involves girls, the Commission was unable to readily identify pending public policy that is intentionally and specifically aimed to support girls. Meanwhile, history, empirical studies, and our data demonstrate that needs remain unmet as a result of gender discrimination, social and, structural obstacles that disproportionately hinders girls, their development, and futures as adult women.

Furthermore, themes identified in the pending legislation are centered around outlets for lasting advocacy, changes or improvements to education that specifically embrace and are comprehensive towards minority groups by race, special needs and gender identity. While the observed policy addresses some concerns mentioned by girls from the Commission's listening sessions, they do not address essential girl centered services, and interpersonal development outlets being advocated for by girls as observed from the *Girls Initiative*.

Continued Advocacy

- S.130 - An Act Establishing a Commission on The Status of Children and Youth
 - The proposed bill will provide young people a permanent voice with which young people may influence legislation. Although this bill does not specifically address girls, allowing girls the opportunity to advocate for issues important to them would empower and promote the welfare of girls throughout the commonwealth.

Education

As the majority of round table and survey participants attended school, legislation related to education affects the daily lives of girls in the Commonwealth.

- S.318/H.673 An Act Relative to Healthy Youth - endorsed by the MCSW
 - The proposed bill will require school districts that offer sex education to provide medically accurate, age-appropriate information. In addition, it focuses curriculum on building healthy relationships and helps youth understand consent and boundaries, and ensures that material is inclusive of lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer or questioning, and/or transgender (LGBQ/T) youth.

- S.304/H.671 An Act Promoting Racially and Culturally Inclusive K-12 Curriculum
 - This proposed bill will ensure that gender, cultural, racial and ethnic stereotypes are not perpetuated in curricula and that contributions of marginalized groups are recognized. As 61% of participants identified as nonwhite, this bill is critical to the safety of girls of color in school.
- H.565 - An Act to Ensure Equitable Access to Education, Including Special Education Services, for All Students in Massachusetts
 - The proposed bill seeks to address inequities in education access and quality for Black and Latinx students, students with disabilities, and girls. This bill will protect young women of color who may experience greater rates of surveillance and punishment at school than their white peers.
- S.310/H.618 An Act relative to LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum
 - The proposed bill will ensure that the histories and contributions of LGBTQ+ individuals in the commonwealth and the country be represented in school curricula. As approximately 25% of round table participants identified as LGBTQ+, this bill would provide positive representation for young women and girl-identifying youth across the Commonwealth.

Health and wellness

- S.1445/H.2354 An Act to Increase Access to Disposable Menstrual Products in Prisons, Homeless Shelters, and Public Schools
 - The “I AM” bill will ensure access to free menstrual products to all menstruating individuals in schools, shelters and prisons.

Areas for Immediate Action + Additional Inquiry

The findings from the 2021 Girls Initiative in conjunction with the findings from the 2020 Girls Initiative establish a significant foundation for developing more intricate and robust initiatives to best serve girl-identified youth in the Commonwealth. The valuable anecdotes and data reinforce important priorities guiding the Commission's commitment to advancing the status of girls in the Commonwealth.

The Commission will continue consistent research through surveys, roundtables, convenings, and hearings to listen and subsequently amplify girl-identified youth's voices. Further, the Commission will maintain its attentive and rigorous review of beneficial public policy that will address girl-identified youth.

To further bridge the gap between constituents and policy, the Commission will pursue opportunities for girl-identified youth engagement and leadership with the Commission and perhaps Regional Commissions. The commitments, including but not limited to the aforementioned immediate actions, will enable the Commission to best approach additional inquiries in accordance with its statutory authority.

The MCSW remains committed to continuing the work of gathering information about the status of women and girls in the Commonwealth. The following topics have been identified as areas for future inquiry or increased engagement.

Exploring Opportunities for Increased Funding for Girl-Identified and Non-Binary

Youth Programing: Girl-identified and non-binary youth programs are significantly underfunded and under-resourced. A Girl Initiative partner, the Boston Women's Fund, in partnership with the Women's Funding Network reports that national funding for women and girls among traditional foundations and public institutions is less than 7.5% of grants awarded.

Exploring the Disproportionate Disciplinary Treatment of Girls, Girls of Color, and Non-Binary Youth in Schools:

Dress codes and grooming policies, unfair discipline practices, and a lack of mental health resources can all contribute to a disruption of education and school-based social engagement. Consider Congresswoman Pressly's PUSHOUT Act in the process of developing policy solutions at the state and local levels.



Expanding Equitable Access to Resources for Mental Health, Sexual Assault Awareness, and Health Education:

The pursuit of equitable access creates opportunities for intentional space for girl-led advocacy as well as the push to establish councils such as the Governor Council on Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault.

Appendix A

FY21 Survey for Girls
Survey for Young Women and Girl-Identified Youth

Last year, the Massachusetts Commission on the Status of Women (MCSW) conducted a survey pre-COVID-19 to gather data on topics that young women and girl-identified youth thought were most important in their development. A survey was also administered to providers of girl-serving and girl-advocating organizations to hear about the programs and support they offered to youth, young women, and families.

This year, the MCSW is interested in hearing how young women and girl-identified youth are managing given the current climate on racial justice and it being one year into COVID-19.

**Definitions of key terms can be found at the bottom of the page

Which of these topics do you believe have been most impacted for you since COVID-19?
(check all that apply)*

Access to physical and mental health services

Bullying/ Cyberbullying

Sexual Orientation and/or Gender Identity

STEM or STEAM

Self-Esteem/ Self Confidence

Racial inequalities and/or disparities

Mentorship/ Leadership Development

Healthy relationships


Housing/Financial Stability

Other...

What services or programs would you like to see in your community that you feel would be beneficial to your success and well-being?*

Have you had any challenges with accessing the following services since the pandemic started?*

Health Care (routine check ups, wellness visits)



Mental Health (counseling, therapy, support groups)

Sexual and Reproductive Health

Hygiene Products

Housing/ Shelter/ Program

Food

Technology/ Internet

No

Other...

Are you a parent or a caregiver? Check all that apply*

Yes

No

Expectant Parent

Expectant Caregiver (a family member or individual who helps with daily activities)

How often do you believe you are treated differently because of your gender identity?*

Never

Sometimes

All the time

I don't know

Prefer not to say

How often do you believe you are treated differently because of your racial or ethnic identity?*

Never

Sometimes

All the time

I don't know

Prefer not to say

Select your racial identity/ identities (OPTIONAL):

Black or African American

White

Hispanic or Latinx

Native American/ Alaskan Native

Asian/ Pacific Islander

Prefer not to say

Two or more races/ethnicities

Other...

Do you identify as a member of the LGBTQ+ community? (OPTIONAL)

Yes

No

I don't know

I rather not say

The Massachusetts Commission on the Status of Women is hosting Virtual Roundtable Discussions for young women and girl-identified youth April 20-22, 2021. Would you be interested in attending?*

Yes

No

If so, what topics would you be interested in hearing or talking about?*

Did you participate in the Massachusetts Commission on the Status of Women's Virtual Girls Listening

Sessions last year?*

Yes

No

Maybe

How did you learn about this survey?*

What town do you live in?*

Key Terms

- Bullying: unwanted, aggressive behavior among school aged children that involves a real or perceived power imbalance.
- Verbal Bullying: saying or writing mean things
- Social Bullying: hurting someone's reputation or relationships
- Physical Bullying: hurting a person's body or possessions
- Cyberbullying: bullying that takes place over digital devices like cell phones, computers, and tablets. Includes sending, posting, or sharing negative, harmful, false, or mean content about someone else. It can include sharing personal or

private information about someone else causing embarrassment or humiliation.

Commonly occurs on:

- Social media: Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat
- Over SMS text or texting apps like WhatsApp
- Email
- Financial stability: not having to worry about paying for expenses or taking care of obligations.
- Gender identity: One's innermost concept of self as male, female, a blend of both or neither – how individuals perceive themselves and what they call themselves. One's gender identity can be the same or different from their sex assigned at birth.
- Healthy relationships: Healthy relationships allow us to feel supported and safe. COMMUNICATION and BOUNDARIES are the two major components of a healthy relationship. This applies to our relationships with members of our family, romantic partners, and friends.
- Housing stability: consistent access to housing in the absence of threats, having choice over when and under what circumstances a household wants to move.
- Mental health services: mental health includes our emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It affects how we think, feel, and act. It also helps determine how we handle stress, relate to others, and make choices. Mental health services involve the assessment, diagnosis, treatment or counseling in a professional relationship to assist an individual or group in alleviating mental or emotional illness, symptoms, conditions or disorders.
- Mentorship: the influence, guidance, or direction given by a trusted counselor or guide.
- Physical health services: physical health is defined as the condition of your body, taking into consideration everything from the absence of disease to fitness level. Good healthcare can help prevent illness, as well as detect and treat illness.
- Racial inequalities/disparities: unequal outcomes in areas like income, education, and health based on race.
- STEM: an acronym for the fields of Science, Technology, Engineering and Math.
- STEAM: an acronym for the approach to learning that uses Science, Technology, Engineering, the Arts and Mathematics as access points for guiding student inquiry, dialogue, and critical thinking.
- Self-esteem: belief and confidence in your own ability and value.
- Sexual orientation: refers to an enduring pattern of emotional, romantic and/or sexual attractions to other people. Sexual orientation also refers to a person's sense

of identity based on those attractions, related behaviors and membership in a community of others who share those attractions.

- Stereotypes: ideas about how people will act based on the group to which they belong such as identifying certain characteristics as belonging only to boys or girls.

Appendix B

FY21 Provider Survey

Provider Survey

Please answer this survey based on your best understanding of your organization's work. For the sake of this survey, the term "girl" refers to cisgender girls, trans girls, or other non-adult individuals that otherwise identify as girls.

Definitions of key terms can be found at the bottom of the page.

Email*

This form is collecting emails. [Change settings](#)

Does your organization offer specific programming or groups for young women or girl-identified youth?*

Young Women

Girl-identified Youth

Both young women and girl-identified youth

No

Does your organization serve young parents, expectant parents, or caregivers?*

Yes

No

Maybe

Pre-COVID-19: Which of these topics has your organization discussed with the girls you serve either as part of regular programming or for a specific event? (check all that apply):*

Access to physical and mental health services

Bullying/ Cyberbullying

Sexual Orientation and/or Gender Identity

STEM or STEAM

Self-Esteem/ Self Confidence
 Racial inequalities and/or disparities
 Mentorship/ Leadership Development
 Healthy relationships
 Housing/ Financial Stability
 Sexual Violence
 In-Home or In-Facility Abuse
 Homelessness
 COVID-19
 Hygiene Products
 Other...


Since the start of COVID-19: Have any of these topics been discussed more, either by or with the girls in your program? (check all that apply):*

Access to physical and mental health services
 Bullying/ Cyberbullying
 Sexual Orientation and/or Gender Identity
 STEM or STEAM
 Self-Esteem/ Self Confidence
 Racial inequalities and/or disparities
 Mentorship/ Leadership Development
 Healthy relationships
 Housing/ Financial Stability
 Sexual Violence
 In-Home or In-Facility Abuse
 Homelessness
 COVID-19
 Hygiene Products
 Other...

How has your organization been managing programs and services during COVID-19? (i.e., virtual, in-person, over the phone)*

Does your organization make referrals for community based services? *

Mental Health Services
 Behavioral Health Services
 Sexual and Reproductive Health Services



No
Other...

Have you seen an increase in the request for services that your organization offers?*

Yes
No
Maybe

Provide an age range of the girls who are part of or assisted by your organization:*

Select the racial identity/ identities that best describe the girls who are members of your organization (OPTIONAL):

Black or African American
White
Hispanic or Latinx
Native American/ Alaskan Native
Asian/ Pacific Islander
Prefer not to say
Identify as two or more races/ethnicities
Other...

Does your organization serve girls who identify as LGBTQ+? (OPTIONAL):

Yes
No
I don't know
We do not gather this information

The Massachusetts Commission on the Status of Women is hosting Virtual Roundtable Discussions for young women, girl-identified youth, and providers of girl-serving/girl-advocating organizations during April 20-22, 2021. Would you be interested in attending the Providers Session?*

Yes
No
Maybe

Key Terms

- Bullying: unwanted, aggressive behavior among school aged children that involves a real or perceived power imbalance.
- Verbal Bullying: saying or writing mean things
- Social Bullying: hurting someone's reputation or relationships
- Physical Bullying: hurting a person's body or possessions
- Cyberbullying: bullying that takes place over digital devices like cell phones, computers, and tablets. Includes sending, posting, or sharing negative, harmful, false, or mean content about someone else. It can include sharing personal or private information about someone else causing embarrassment or humiliation. Commonly occurs on:
 - Social media: Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat
 - Over SMS text or texting apps like WhatsApp
 - Email
- Financial stability: not having to worry about paying for expenses or taking care of obligations.
- Gender identity: One's innermost concept of self as male, female, a blend of both or neither – how individuals perceive themselves and what they call themselves. One's gender identity can be the same or different from their sex assigned at birth.
- Healthy relationships: Healthy relationships allow us to feel supported and safe. COMMUNICATION and BOUNDARIES are the two major components of a healthy relationship. This applies to our relationships with members of our family, romantic partners, and friends.
- Housing stability: consistent access to housing in the absence of threats, having choice over when and under what circumstances a household wants to move.
- Mental health services: mental health includes our emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It affects how we think, feel, and act. It also helps determine how we handle stress, relate to others, and make choices. Mental health services involve the assessment, diagnosis, treatment or counseling in a professional relationship to assist an individual or group in alleviating mental or emotional illness, symptoms, conditions or disorders.
- Mentorship: the influence, guidance, or direction given by a trusted counselor or guide.
- Physical health services: physical health is defined as the condition of your body, taking into consideration everything from the absence of disease to fitness level. Good healthcare can help prevent illness, as well as detect and treat illness.
- Racial inequalities/disparities: unequal outcomes in areas like income, education, and health based on race.

- STEM: an acronym for the fields of Science, Technology, Engineering and Math.
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- Stereotypes: ideas about how people will act based on the group to which they belong such as identifying certain characteristics as belonging only to boys or girls.