



**A PORTRAIT  
of the  
VOICES OF GIRLS  
in the  
WASHINGTON, DC  
METRO AREA**

A Focus Group Report  
Prepared for the  
Girl Scout Council of the Nation's Capitol (GSCNC)  
September 20, 2010

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**R**esearch  
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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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The Girl Scout Council of the Nation's Capital would like to acknowledge the contribution of the Girl Scouts who participated voluntarily in these focus groups and without whom this research would not have been possible. These Girl Scouts graciously gave us their time and openly shared their perspectives and concerns about their lives and the lives of girls like themselves. These girls exemplify the Girl Scout principles of leadership where girls learn by discovering, connecting and taking action. The findings of this research demonstrate not only the value of Girl Scouting in developing strong voices for girls, but it also shows the challenges that all girls face in navigating the transition from childhood to adulthood. The Girl Scout Council of the Nation's Capitol would like to thank these girls for their courage, confidence and character, which we believe shines brightly on the futures of women and girls everywhere.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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In order to gain a better understanding of the voices of girls in the Washington, DC, metropolitan area, two focus groups were conducted by *Strategic Research Concepts* in August, 2010, with the participants drawn from teenage girls who are members of troops in the Girl Scout Council of the Nation's Capitol (GSCNC). The focus group protocol was developed to learn how girls understand and define leadership, how they see problems and public policy issues at the national and community levels, and for girls like themselves, and to understand how girls see themselves as leaders who can take action on these issues. The focus group participants were recruited by GSCNC program staff and reflected the diversity of girls in the DC metropolitan area. The focus group facilitation conducted by professional facilitators included traditional brainstorming and the nominal voting technique to learn how girls prioritize aspects of leadership and policy problems.

Girls, as evidenced in these focus groups, have strong voices. Girls clearly valued leaders who set an example in both their public and personal lives (including within the family), leaders who took risks to fill a leadership vacuum, who lead others, and women leaders who created new definitions of what it means to be a woman and how women view themselves. Girls coming out of Girl Scouting believe that "any girl can be a leader." These girls valued how Girl Scouting works to develop personal leadership in girls by providing the freedom to develop leadership and by showing kindness toward others, encouraging leadership in group settings, and being part of a team with other girls. While the girls believed that "women can be whatever they want," they felt that women and girls had distinctive leadership qualities – more oriented

toward peace, and a greater capacity for empathy and an ability to bring out strengths in others in group settings. These girls also saw themselves as leaders within their families, on teams and as part of a group, and in working on public policy issues as a Girl Scout.

The economy emerged as the most important national policy problem. Violence, prioritized second among national problems, emerged as the largest problem locally in the DC metropolitan area. Girls identified the source of violence as community disunity, and saw its effects in a lack of safety in the community and as gender violence in the daily lives of girls. Environmental issues were both national and local. In terms of problems facing girls and girls like themselves, the most important problem identified reflected relationships with boys and “dating pressures to have sex” as well as “peer pressure of what you should weigh, how tall you should be, to look a particular way, to have sex.” Girls spoke eloquently about how this, in turn, creates panic attacks, eating disorders, and depression. In addition, girls are also experiencing both academic pressure to excel and family problems and stress.

While girls clearly identified parents, families, guidance counselors and schools as potential resources for girls, a theme emerged that girls lacked confidence that these resources and leaders were either attuned to the problems girls face (“I don’t know if [they really know].... I think they must, but [they] don’t seem to be aware”) or would listen to girls’ voices (“No one listens to us”). Nonetheless, these girls aspired to leadership and had numerous, specific ideas about how to solve problems, including public education, organizing groups and working with public sector leaders.

# A Portrait of the Voices of Girls in the Washington, DC, Metropolitan Area

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## INTRODUCTION

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This report presents the findings of two focus groups conducted with teen-age girls (aged 12-17). The purpose of the focus groups was to obtain a portrait of the voices of girls in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area. The focus group technique was used to obtain in-depth views of girls on leadership, qualities of leaders, national and local problems, problems facing girls, and how girls envisioned taking action and what kinds of action is needed to solve problems.

Focus group participants were recruited by the Girl Scout Council of the Nation's Capital (GSCNC) among Girl Scout troops within the Washington, DC, metro area<sup>1</sup>. GSCNC asked girls to volunteer as part of their leadership contribution to the Girl Scouts. Participants were recruited from multiple troops and included girls in both Virginia and Maryland metropolitan area.

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<sup>1</sup> This effort was led by Brigid Howe, Manager of Program Services, and Caroline Schreiber, Teen Program Specialist, for the Girl Scout Council of the Nation's Capitol (GSCNC).



The two focus groups encompassed the diversity of teenage girls in Washington, DC, metro area. The first focus group, held in Lorton, Virginia, included 22 girls. This group was diverse, coming from different schools and both African-American (4); Asian (1); and Caucasian (18) girls spanning the age range of 12-17 years of age. The second focus group was smaller in size – including 5 girls. This focus group included 1 African-American girl and 4 Caucasian girls all approximately the same age (about 14-15 years). Some of the girls were in the same troop and knew each other.

The focus group technique is a planned, focused discussion based upon a specific discussion guide to encourage an open and frank sharing of views. The girls were provided an explanation of the process and purposes of the research. This included the goal of understanding the views of girls in their own words. It was explained that sometimes they will agree with each other, and other times there will be a variety of views, and that there were no right or wrong answers. Each focus group lasted for two hours, with the first half-hour used for introductions, an explanation of the process, and an icebreaker. All girls spoke in both groups, and the most animated discussion in both groups occurred when

the girls were discussing issues and challenges that girls like themselves faced.

Participation in the focus groups was voluntary. Permission for participation in the focus groups was obtained from the parent (or guardian), and assent from the girls was also obtained. All participants were promised confidentiality, and promised access to the report.

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## **METHODOLOGY**

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The methodology for this research involved use of multiple focus groups to obtain a valid and reliable picture of girls' voices. The methodology involved traditional focus group facilitation as well as the use of nominal group voting to gain a sense of how girls valued and prioritized the broader discussions as it progressed. Traditional focus group methodology is based upon an in-depth discussion with a homogeneous set of participants – in this case, adolescent and teenage girls within the D.C. metropolitan area. Nominal group voting allows a group to provide further reflection on the discussion by voting on how important particular topics or issues are to them.

Both focus groups covered four main topics using the same protocol:

- A. Defining Leadership
- B. How Girls See Women and Girls as Leaders
- C. Girls Perspectives on National, Local, and Problems Faced by Girls Like Themselves, and
- D. How Girls Envisioned Making a Change.

Each question included a variety of probes to encourage wide-ranging discussion (*see Box 1*). Both focus groups discussed all four topics in great detail. However, each focus group diverged slightly on some discussions based upon the actual discussion provided by the girls in each group.

For example, the first focus group did not discuss the Girl Scout Model of Leadership, while this was a topic discussed in detail in the second focus group. The second focus group, by contrast, did not discuss personal leadership experiences.

The report itself combines the responses of both focus groups by stressing themes evident across both focus groups. Where appropriate, actual quotes are provided to exemplify specific themes. In terms of the nominal voting, votes of both focus groups are combined where appropriate. In other cases, the votes of only one focus group is provided.

**Focus Group Methodology.** Focus groups are based upon an in-depth exploration of topics. The focus group methodology is designed to

## Box 1 FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

### Introductions

### Explanation of the Focus Group Process Icebreaker

#### TOPIC A: How Do You Define Leadership?

- (probe)* Is there a great leader that you know?
- (probe)* What makes them a great leader?
- (probe)* Are there types of leaders?
- (probe)* What are the qualities of a leader?
- (probe)* Can you provide a personal example?

#### TOPIC B: How Do You See Women and Girls as Leaders?

- (probe)* Can a girl be a leader?
- (probe)* What is the Girl Scout model of leadership?
- (probe)* Do women have strengths as leaders?
- (probe)* Do you see yourself as a leader?
- (probe)* In what situations are you a leader?
- (probe)* Are there barriers to girls (and women) being a leader?
- (probe)* What are the strengths of women and girls as leaders?

#### TOPIC C: What Do You Think are the Major Problems and Issues Needing Action?

- (probe)* What are the most important national problems facing the U.S.?
- (probe)* What are the most important local problems facing the DC Metro Area?
- (probe)* What are the most important problems facing girls like you?

#### TOPIC D: How Would You Suggest Making a Change on These Issues?

- (probe)* What help is needed to fix these problems?
- (probe)* How would you make a change?
- (probe)* What contribution would you make?
- (probe)* Do you feel you have enough leaders in your life?

use group interaction to spark broader discussion than might appear in an individual group.

The result is more like an interview than a meeting in that the participants respond to the facilitator's questions and probes. In addition, participants hear each other's responses and have the opportunity to make additional responses based upon their reaction to what other people have to say.

The purpose of facilitation is to create a permissive and accepting environment that nurtures different points of view without judging the value of those viewpoints. The value of doing so in a group encourages the participants to respond to one another's ideas and comments.

**Nominal Voting Process.** In addition to discussing these topics, the girls were asked to vote in order to prioritize the topics discussed. The purpose of this technique allows the focus group discussion to receive a deeper level of consideration by the participants, and to permit conclusions to be drawn about the relative ranking of individual issues.

The purpose of the nominal voting technique allows girls to individually express the intensity of their views on the topics. The nominal group methodology provides for decision-making where the views of all are taken

into account rather than traditional voting, where only the views of the largest group is considered. During the focus group generation of ideas, they were recorded on a flip chart using the words spoken by the participant or an agreed upon term. At this point, the participants were offered an opportunity to add to or revise the list (which happened in a few cases, although nothing was deleted). Then, the girls were offered the opportunity to vote and rank their priorities. Within selected specific topic areas, girls were given 5 “sticky dots” and permitted to vote.

*In all cases, the girls were asked to vote based on what they felt was important to girls like themselves.*

The girls were offered several options for voting. In all cases, the votes involved a “bullet” voting process where each girl could place up to five votes (using a sticky “dot”) on a single item, or spread them out among different items based upon their priorities as they saw them for girls like themselves. This process permits consideration of the intensity of views as well as providing a picture of the overall group priorities.

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## **FOCUS GROUP REPORT**

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The following discussion presents the combined results of both focus groups. As is typical of traditional focus groups, consistent themes are noted. In addition, the priorities of the girls in nominal voting are indicated. It is noted in the report where the findings or nominal voting reflect a discussion in only one group. Wherever possible, specific quotes are provided to exemplify themes. Each specific quote is followed by a number in parenthesis (either (1) or (2)) which indicates whether the quote was provided in the first (1) or second (2) focus group.

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### **A. Girls' Views of Leadership**

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*The first question was how do girls define leadership?*

In both groups, a dominant theme that emerged encompassed how the personal and public faces of leadership are linked for girls.

**Identifying Great Leaders.** Girls clearly valued leaders who set an example in both their public and personal lives.

"most political leaders are not as good a leader as they might seem...so like even presidents, yeah they ran a country and everything but were they really great leaders...just because they had a certain job doesn't mean they were"  
(2)

Abraham Lincoln – a President of the U.S., for example, was valued because of his personal characteristics rather than just his office accomplishments.

"Abraham Lincoln [was a great leader] - that he's honest and he thinks about other people but mostly because he's honest. He really can't lie to you about anyone." (2)

Personal leadership examples that reflected great leaders involved the ability of individuals to step up and take a stand where there is a leadership vacuum and in the face of personal danger.

"The Colorado shooting victim who stuck up for her religion in the face of death. She was asked "Do you believe in God?" and she answered 'Yes.'" (1)

"I play sports and on our softball team and there was one practice where the coaches couldn't come and one of the girls took control of the whole thing." Someone who took charge, her own age and showed leadership." (2)



Other great leaders were cited because they led by making change through leading others.

"Gandhi led by organizing political action and protested peacefully to fight for India's freedom." (1)

"Martin Luther King Jr. made sure everyone was equal and respected. He never gave up and continued to fight for freedom despite fears for his own life." (1)

"Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. who stood up for what he believed but he didn't do it violently and he did it in his own way." (2)

Other great leaders mentioned by the girls led by creating new areas of public action and by overcoming personal barriers.

"Rachel Carson led by creating environmentalist concern." (1)

"Helen Keller was blind and deaf, but she went to college and overcame barriers to educate others ." (1)

Discussion of public leadership examples mentioned by the girls stressed how public figures can use their position to help others.

"Michelle Obama sets a great example for women. You can grow up, stand up for what you believe, and accomplish what you want to do. She makes people more aware of important problems like obesity and develops public programs to solve them." (1)

"Oprah takes things that people may not be thinking of as a problem; and helps publicize them to the public. She

also helps individual people who can come on her show and get help." (1)

Several examples of leadership were cited by the girls which stressed personal leadership for both family and others.

Harriet Tubman [was a leader because] "she escaped as a slave but she actually came back for her family...they talked about her as being the one that freed them and for her to be so good of a leader to be able to control them while they're scared...to get them to safety and to take care of them after when she was so tired." (2)

"Florence Nightingale [led because she was] "the first woman nurse and she went all over the world and helped hospitals so they could accommodate more people." (2)

Other examples of great leaders cited by the girls emphasized how women can create new definitions of what it means to be a woman and how women view themselves.

"Lady Gaga made her own definition of beautiful. She is proud of who she is and gives us the message that 'if you're not normal you can fit in.'" (1)

"Coco Chanel is a leader because she changed the way women think of themselves. She was bold, didn't care about people's opinions and created the first pair of pants for women." (1)

Amelia Earhart [was a great leader because] “everyone said she couldn’t do it because women are stupid but she went ahead and just did it...” (2)

Sports leaders comprised a distinct category of great leaders who inspired girls to do things they had been told they could not do. Girls in both focus groups mentioned several examples.

“Mia Hamm excels at a sport and did so when she had no role models herself. She helps others to achieve and is active in making sure that young girls know that it is okay to break the stereotype.” (1)

“the lady who was the first one to swim the English Channel...everyone said she couldn’t do it and she actually beat all the men’s times. I thought that was pretty awesome and she did it even though everyone said she couldn’t do it, she did.” (2)

“bolt” “he was [a great leader], I know he’s from Jamaica, but he was really fast and he was in track and he ran the 200 meters in nine point two seconds...he strove and he didn’t give up and probably he got really, really tired...he beat everyone and got a gold medal...he probably went through a lot and probably there was a lot of pressure on him to do better than he did before.” (2)

Juliette Gordon Low, affectionately known as “Daisy,” the founder of Girl Scouting was specifically mentioned as a great leader. Girl

Scouting did emerge as a theme in both focus groups, although the Girl Scout Model of Leadership was discussed in depth in only the second focus group. In addition, a number of girls mentioned troop leaders and coaches as great leaders.

"Daisy took action to create Girl Scouts"

"A leader from another troop - everyone wanted to be around her;" "she was eighteen"; "she was really great" (2)

"I went to sleepaway camp and there was a leader who was a really good leader. She was a lot of fun. She started this waterballoon fight." She made it really fun and she hit a sea turtle. A leader is someone that makes things really fun but is nice but still is strict and doesn't let us run around like maniacs." (2)

"Good leadership is when they let us do something different instead of something we didn't want to do. We were at track and the coach couldn't come...we could do long jumps and they could tell we didn't want to run track the whole time so they let us do what we want." (2)

Finally, family members who showed personal leadership as well as public leadership were cited by many as great leaders.

"My mother leads because she doesn't sit back and watch other people and follow. She works ahead and takes the initiative to do things. She works on things as soon as she can and doesn't wait for deadlines to come." (1)

"My sister is a leader because she doesn't let people walk over her. She is confident and self-aware and defends

herself against people taking advantage of her by calling them out on it.” (1)

“My father is a leader. He is a soldier in the army in Iraq. He is fighting for our country and for all Americans.” (1)

Girls in both focus groups emphatically did not see leadership as “male only.” The discussion included views that women leaders were more common than in the recent past, while others saw continued barriers to women’s leaders. Overall, the girls emphasized that women could be great leaders. Leadership was described by the girls as a variable skill that can be developed in a variety of different arenas of life – national politics, media, military, representing a particular group (e.g., civil rights or representing women or the disabled), sports, and fashion as well as leaders on particular issues (e.g., the environment) or in daily or individual life.

**Nominal Voting on Great Leaders.** Girls in the first focus group voted on great leaders who are most important to girls. Here, personal and family leadership was stressed: 59% of the prioritized votes went to family members, and of these “family votes,” 70% went to “mother.”

**Prioritized Nominal Voting  
Great Leaders Important to Girls**  
[Focus Group #1]

<u>Great Leaders</u>	<u>Priority Votes</u>	
	<u>#</u>	<u>Percent</u>
Mother	16	41 %
Father	4	10 %
Michelle Obama	4	10 %
Oprah	4	10 %
Sister	3	8 %
Rachel Carson	2	5 %
Lady Gaga	2	5 %
Helen Keller	1	3 %
“Daisy” Juliette Gordon Low	1	3 %
Coco Chanel	1	3 %
Gandhi	1	3 %

Leadership which focused on helping others and creating new programs and approaches that provide positive models for girls were also prioritized. This includes “Daisy,” Coco Chanel, Helen Keller and Lady Gaga, as well as Michelle Obama and Oprah. Rachel Carson and Gandhi were also prioritized as providing important leadership in the environment and in new ways to make peaceful change.

**Defining Leadership Qualities.** Girls in both focus groups brainstormed core qualities of leadership. These leadership qualities included both personal characteristics of leaders as well as the ways in which leaders demonstrated their leadership.

<u>Quality</u>	<u>Priority Votes</u>	
	<u>#</u>	<u>Percent</u>
Bold, Takes Risks, Took Action	14	33 %
Helps People, Others to Achieve	6	14 %
Leads Others, Open-Minded, Creates Awareness	6	14 %
Confident, Sense of Self	6	14 %
Patient, Supportive	5	12 %
Overcomes Challenges, Perseveres	2	5 %
Peaceful Protest to Make Change	2	5 %
Defines Beauty	1	2 %

“I think the biggest trait of a leader is that she needs to be able to discipline but she can’t be controlling.” (2)

[Leaders not only lead but] “can also follow” (2)

[Great leaders] “can take criticism well” (2)

[Leaders include] “someone who makes mistakes, too, so not everything is perfect but [who can] makes mistakes too” (2)

[A leader is able to] “adapt to different situations” (2)

**Prioritizing Leadership Qualities.** The first focus group voted on qualities of leadership that were identified.

When asked to prioritize leadership qualities that reflected qualities of interest to women and girls, the ability to be bold, take action and take risks was the most important characteristic prioritized, receiving one-third of the votes. Tied for second most important leadership quality included helping others, leading others and creating awareness of problems and issues, and being confident and having a good sense of self. This was followed by leaders who are patient and supportive of others. Girls also valued leaders who overcame challenges and persevered, acted through peaceful protest to make change, and redefined beauty.

**Naming Personal Examples of Leadership.** Girls saw qualities of leadership in themselves as well as in adults they knew.

[Working with younger children] "they look up to you" "with little kids, they're not gonna judge you, they don't care about what you're wearing...as long as you give them attention they love you." 2)

[Working with younger children] "you have to be more patient, because they're more detail-oriented...if their sandwich is not cut sideways..." (2)

"everyday leaders like your mom and dad...like an older person, a person older than you, at least ten years" (2)

"wiser and older people...they've been through the same

experiences they can sorta help you through it" (1)

"an older person who has gone through something that you've been through, they've gone through elementary school, middle school, high school (2)

"somebody who helps people who have a crisis...someone who provides guidance" "psychologists, guidance counselors" (2)

Overall, the focus group discussion revealed a distinctive understanding of leadership which include personal qualities of character as well as the ability to lead others in ways that reflected caring for others. The girls identified a number of women leaders in different policy arenas who had redefined what it means to be a girl and a woman, and were able to see themselves as leaders in their own lives.

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## **B. How Girls View Women and Girls as Leaders**

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*The second question is how do girls see women and girls as leaders?*

Both focus groups identified a need for women leaders and identified some strengths that women have as leaders. Girls in the first focus group



identified situations where they had been a leader, and girls in the second focus group highlighted the Girl Scout Model of Leadership.

**An Emphasis on the Need for Women Leaders.** Girls in both focus groups identified a need for women leaders, and most said they would like to learn more about women leaders.

“Girls tend to look up to women, and boys to men. Girls look to women and other girls to be role models.” (1)

“Usually in history, female leaders are very rare so it is more of an honor to be a female leader (or mentioned as a leader). Many women leaders were never mentioned in history but existed.” (1)

“[We] understand that the past was hard. But there are a lot of women leaders now to learn from. A big change has happened. Women are being recognized more than men now.” (1)

**Defining the Girl Scout Model of Leadership.** The Girl Scout model of leadership was discussed at length in the second focus group. Themes developed here stressed how the Girl Scout program develops leadership based upon the model that any girl can be a leader and providing space that gives girls the freedom to grow.

**Prioritized Nominal Voting  
Girl Scout Leadership Qualities**  
[Focus Group #2]

Quality	Priority Votes	
	#	Percent
Any Girl Can Be a Leader	4	40 %
Thinks About the Needs of Others	3	30 %
Relatable	2	20 %
Puts Others First	1	10 %

"I've been with the same troop all my life, and I've seen girls that start out really shy but then all of a sudden you see them at camp and they are really great leaders...give them the chance to be leaders and they shine." (2)

As these girls stressed, Girl Scouting develops personal leadership qualities by developing kindness towards others, by showing personal leadership in group settings, and being part of the team.

"to be kind, helping people so that they learn from mistakes"  
(2)

"they have to be kind to people, and like she said "discipline us" but not "control us." (2)

"somebody who is more down to earth who is a role model because...if somebody acts like they're better than everyone else then they can't be a good leader" (2)

"if the group has like a split decision, she can help them work together to come to a decision, not too controlling and doesn't think she is better than anyone else" (2)

"if they're all really hungry and they're hiking and they haven't eaten for a few hours, instead of complaining herself she starts distracting them and when they get there she makes sure they get something to eat" (2)

**Prioritizing Elements of the Girl Scout Model of Leadership.** When the Girl Scout Model of Leadership qualities were prioritized using nominal voting, the modal category (40%) was the idea that "any girl can be a leader." This was followed characteristics that reflect the

ability of leaders who can relate to others, be relatable, and their ability to put others first.

**Identifying Strengths Women and Girls Have as Leaders.** Girls in the two focus groups offered a range of views on the strengths that women and girls possess as leaders. Some, for example, saw no differences while others felt that any differences could be a weakness as well as a strength.

"Women can be whatever they want." (1)

" Women shouldn't be limited in what they think. They should be able to do as much as men can do. They should have the same choices as men in terms of leadership." (1)

"guys have testosterone but girls tend to compare themselves to other girls and that also makes it...competitive" "I think it can be both [a strength and a weakness]. (2)

"I'm sorta in the middle. Some girls think they know everything." (2)

Most saw differences, however, in women's leadership. One difference was in how women related to issues of war and peace. This difference was prioritized by one vote in the first focus group.

"Women tend to be more peaceful." (1)

"If women led the world, there would be no war. " (1)

One theme was the greater degree of patience, nurturing, empathy and sensitiveness that women tend to have.

- "Sometimes girls can make better leaders than guys...my brother and also his friends don't like kids but girls love to be around kids and take care of them" (2)
- "Girls are more sensitive than guys" (2)
- "Girls are more patient" (2)

Another difference identified was in how men and women approach public policy issues.

- "Men tend to think more of the 'here and now' while women can step back, and look at things in terms of long-term."  
(1)

### Identifying Situations Where Girls Have Been a Leader.

Similar to the strengths of women and girls as leaders, the situations identified by the girls where they have demonstrated leadership involve teamwork, nurturance, and a strong sense of self as evidenced in their ability to avoid peer pressure.

- "A team captain. You lead by not only trying to accomplish a goal, but also to be your best." (1)
- " As a babysitter. The kids look up to you. You act as a role model for young children who you are responsible for.

#### Prioritized Nominal Voting Personal Leadership for Girls [Focus Group #1]

Quality	Priority Votes	
	#	Percent
Avoiding Peer Pressure	7	58 %
Leading a Team	3	25 %
Leadership in the Family	1	8 %
Leading while Babysitting	1	8 %

You teach them things and how to respond to different situations." (1)

"When you are overcoming peer pressure, and when you don't do drugs or skip school." (1)

"Family leadership. I act as a role model for siblings, cousins." (1)

"School project. I show leadership in helping everyone accomplish the set goal. We may be assigned in a group by a teacher and not know each other or come from the same place." (1)

**Prioritizing Examples of Girls Leadership.** When prioritized by use of nominal voting, nearly three-fifths (58%) of the prioritized examples of personal leadership relevant to girls like themselves included resisting peer pressure. This was followed by group-based examples of leadership: leading a team, leading within the family, and leadership while working with children (babysitting).

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## C. Girls' Views of Problems and Issues That Require Leadership

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*The third question was what do girls think are the major problems and issues needing action?*

Girls in both focus groups displayed an ability to differentiate between national and local problems or issues, and a keen awareness of the distinctive issues and problems that girls like themselves faced.

**Identifying and Prioritizing National Problems and Issues.** Girls brainstormed a wide variety of national problems and issues. Examples and themes related to national problems are discussed here by the type of problem identified.

**Prioritized Nominal Voting  
National Issues and Problems**  
[BOTH Focus Groups]

Quality	Priority Votes	
	#	Percent
Economic	19	23 %
Violence	11	13 %
Environment	9	11 %
Gay Rights	9	11 %
Health Care	8	10 %
Animal Rights, Over Population	7	8 %
Other	21	25 %

**Economic Problems.** When asked to prioritize what were the most important national issues of concern to girls, economic issues emerged as the

top issue in both focus groups, based upon nearly a quarter of the votes (23%).

Examples of this concern included:

Jobs (1)

“Loss of jobs and unemployment” (1)

“There’s no much debt - people’s jobs are being cut right  
and left”

“Homelessness - people are losing jobs and money, homes. ”  
(1)

Homelessness (1)

Economic stature of the US in the world (1)

“The economy” (2)

Money - how the president said that everything was gonna get  
better but it has not. How well people are doing? (1)

Foreclosure (1)

“Like hunger, work on the soup kitchens are really dry so the  
economy is making some people go hungry” (2)

“Wastefulness in the U.S.” (1)

***Violence and Crime Problems.*** The next most important national issues was a concern over violence, which received 13% of the prioritized votes.

Killing people for no reason. (1)

Violence (1)

Crime rate (1)

***Environmental Problems.*** These concerns over violence were followed by a concern with the environment. Environmental issues

received 11% of the prioritized votes.

Environment (1)

Global warming (1)

The oil spill (1)

"The BP oil spill in the Gulf" (2)

Deforestation (1)

Waste and lack of appreciation for the resources that we  
have in the US. We have a lot more than other  
countries but we don't use it well. (1)

Depletion of natural resources (1)

***Gay Rights as a Policy Problem.*** Gay rights was also prioritized by 11% of the votes. No specific quotes were provided on gay rights.

***Health Issues.*** Health and health care were prioritized by 10% of the votes. This policy area was viewed in diverse ways – ranging from how health care is provided to specific health problems.

Healthcare (1)

World hunger (1)

Obesity (1)

"the health of the people, in general like obesity" (2)

***Animal Rights Issues.*** Animal abuse and overpopulation emerged as a distinctive issues in the second focus group as this was a subject of a project done by one of the girls. This issue provoked some extended discussion which clearly exemplified the Girl Scout Model of Leadership (discovering,



connecting and taking action) as the girls acknowledge work done by one of the participants. Overall, this received 8% of the prioritized votes.

“spaying and neutering your pets...I actually have my silver in it...I’ve always been passionate about this...in order for every pet to have a home, every family would have to take in 7 pets and I think this is ridiculous...I really don’t like breeders because they have people pay so much for a pure breed.” (2)

“dog fighting<sup>2</sup> because it’s sorta okay not sorta, its really sad because they train dogs to hurt other dogs and people bet on it, and people lose money.” Pit bulls and stuff (2)

***Other Issues and Problems.*** There were a variety of other issues mentioned in both focus groups that attracted discussion and received one, two or three individual votes in the nominal group voting. Overall, this included a quarter of the prioritized votes. Other comments indicated some frustration with how national issues are addressed or managed by government. For example,

“natural disasters, like hurricanes, could be an issue because with hurricane Katrina they didn’t expect the levees to

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<sup>2</sup> The Michael Vick dogfighting case was in the local and national news in 2007-2009. Vick, a native Virginian and Virginia Tech collegiate and National Football League star, pleaded guilty to involvement in illegal dogfighting in 2007, served 21 months in prison, and later signed with the Philadelphia Eagles and gaining reinstatement in 2009.

break." (2)

"when something breaks down there should be an alarm and something telling someone that something is going wrong so someone is not stuck in an elevator...in an emergency" (2)

Other comments indicated a lack of trust in governmental institutions, concerns about international relations, and misunderstandings among the public about national problems.

"the government in general but we need to check equipment more and the government was doing something else with the money" (2)

"disputes between the parties, like Democrats and Republicans...are always at each other's throats" (2)

"I sorta think there should just be one political party because they always argue so much...all I usually hear is the two political parties is arguing about something and nothing gets done." (2)

Communication between countries (1)

International relations (1)

"we need to keep our own business our own business and not get involved in other countries" (2)

General lack of understanding - when people complain about government-run health care but support some forms of it (medicare). [There is a] Lack of civic education and understanding public problems. (1)

## Identifying and Prioritizing Local Issues and

**Problems.** DC metropolitan area issues and problems that were cited in the focus groups reflected distinctively local community problems. Girls in both focus groups reflected a sophisticated ability to differentiate between national and local problems. These themes are also discussed by the degree of emphasis placed on each topic area by the girls in their nominal voting.

***Community Disunity and Local Violence.*** Community disunity and violence was prioritized by nearly a third of votes. The girls were keenly aware of how interpersonal conflicts created a lack of community.

“Many people in this area separate themselves from other people” (1)

“People are not close knit and supportive of others.” (1)

“There is a lack of a sense of community.’ (1)

“No one around to keep everyone in check -or to lead.” (1)

“People are not really respecting emergency vehicles anymore...when an ambulance is coming they just keep going instead of pulling out of the way” (2)

### Prioritized Nominal Voting Local Issues and Problems [BOTH Focus Groups]

<u>Local Issue</u>	<u>Priority Votes</u>	
	<u>#</u>	<u>Percent</u>
Community Disunity & Violence	17	32 %
Environmental Problems	9	17 %
Education	8	15 %
Health Care	8	15 %
Drugs/Alcohol/Smoking	6	11 %
Workplace Safety	3	6 %
Other	3	6 %

"We live farther back [it] is more country based and not city based. [When there is a funeral], you'll be lucky to see one other people pulled to the side respectfully and we use to see lots." (2)

Community disunity was linked to higher crime, increased violence, and problems in personal safety in the use of public transportation.

"Communication in the area [has led to problems and] gang violence, many killings." (1)

"There are many gangs and a lot of violence." (1)

"the crime rate keeps increasing" (2)

"security, like on the subway its so filthy and nasty and some of the stations have video cameras but they don't actually turn them on because they cost money...better lighting on the subway (2)

"I think there should be more booths are the subway so you can ask for help...some people get confused and they don't ask for help because they don't know anyone...they have to wait almost all day and miss work because they don't know where they're going." (2)

***Environmental Problems.*** Environmental problems also appeared at the local level. In contrast to national environmental issues, girls saw the environment and the quality of environment as also important in their local communities.

"Overcrowding and pollution" (1)

"Businesses around here and big companies need to check

their equipment more especially if they're working in chemicals...if they're working in a power plant they can be exposed." (2)

"I think smoking is a big problem anyway and I think it's just really bad and also n the stores and on the streets...I have nothing against people who smoke but I think they should do it where other people aren't going to be hurt by it. There should be specific areas where you can smoke. Laws just force people outside." (2)

"some people bring their kids to bars where they don't have a law so its secondhand smoke." (2)

***Education.*** Girls also saw education as an important local problem. Here, schools and the need to make sure they are adequately funded was important.

"Schools - are not very good." (1)

"Budget cuts in schools." (1)

While not specifically discussed in this section, girls in both focus groups also identified teachers and guidance counselors within the schools as potential leaders who could help girls. In addition, later discussion stressed that in many cases there are leadership gaps where adults in schools fail to take action to address drugs, alcohol, bullying and peer pressure.

***Health Issues.*** Healthcare was an issue that appeared as a local problem as well as a national one. Here, girls identified that gaps in health

insurance coverage and a lack of access to healthy food contributed to health problems.

"Healthcare is a problem. My mom works in a hospital where many people come in without health insurance." (1)

"Lack of healthy foods." (1)

***Drugs, Alcohol and Smoking.*** Drugs, alcohol and smoking were also viewed as local problems for girls. This involved both the availability of drugs as well as local planning and zoning issues which allowed easy access to alcohol.

"Drug use." (1)

"There are a lot more drug stores or places that sell alcohol...there are like seven near me and the store" (2)

**Problems Facing Girls Like You.** Girls in both focus groups had a great deal to say concerning problems that they face daily as girls. This portion of the focus group in both groups produced the most animated discussion of all the topics discussed. The girls shared that they face an array of problems distinctive to girls during their teen years for which adults and leaders in their lives fall short in helping them with. Here, as before, the problems identified by the girls are discussed in the priority order identified by the girls in nominal voting.

***Relationship with Boys and Dating Pressures.*** The overwhelming set of problems faced by girls center around relationships with boys and dating pressures. One theme that emerged reflected how boys reacted to their own experiences of puberty, and immature ways that boys expressed themselves to girls.

“guys don’t have much respect for girls, a puberty thing that guys think girls are too moody” (2)

“they can only look at your chest and not your eyes, it gets irritating” (2)

[boys can be immature and sometimes]  
 “boys throw something at you to get your attention” (2)

“guys in general” dating, relationships, boyfriend-type, boyfriends with multiple girlfriends (2)

**Prioritized Nominal Voting  
 Problems and Issues  
 for Girls Like You  
 [BOTH Focus Groups]**

<u>Problems for Girls</u>	<u>Priority Votes</u>	
	<u>#</u>	<u>Percent</u>
Dating and Sexual Issues	57	42 %
Health and Self-Image and Body Image	15	11 %
Peer Pressure and Bullying	15	11 %
Academic Pressure	14	15 %
Alcohol and Drugs	12	11 %
Self-Esteem and Mental Health Issues	10	10 %
Relationships with Other Girls	8	6 %
Sexism from Guys	3	2 %

**Changing to Fit In.** According to the girls, there is also considerable pressure. This pressure, in turn, can heighten how girls think of themselves and how they feel they should act when in a relationship.

"you have to change something [in order to attract boys]...like I hate dresses but there's this guy I like and I kept wearing dresses to get his attention and I ended up falling and twisting my ankle." (2)

"you should give your boyfriend your love and respect but not change yourself" (2)

**Pressure to Have Sex.** This pressure also creates other problems. Dating pressure can also be a factor in forcing girls to have sex before they are ready.

"there is dating pressure to have sex." (1)

"the image of girls is harmed - a lot of girls think they need to have sex to fit in which isn't true." (1)

"way too much peer pressure like when you hear about like girls 14, 11 getting pregnant...you know what a girl normally that age wouldn't get into that situation but if all her friends say" guys "like they think girls aren't as good, can't do as much" (2)

"one of my friends got a text from a guys that asked for explicit photos and so I think the whole sexting thing has gotten out of control" (2)



**Teen Pregnancy.** Girls in both focus groups demonstrated a relatively mature understanding of how teen pregnancy itself creates other, serious problems for girls and for society.

“Teenage pregnancy - the world and the US is already overpopulated” (1)

“with so many girls getting pregnant so young, they can't take care of their babies; which leads to the problem of abortion.” (1)

“high schools have to put money aside to create in-house day care that should be going towards the school itself.” (1)

“not everyone can afford to raise a child themselves or take care of the baby itself.” (1)

The girls expressed considerable ambivalence about whether they could trust boys on these issues.

“a guy himself could help like you could talk to him about things that bother you in your relationship [one-on-one]” (2)

“from my experience, most teenage guys just don't care so I think you're always gonna have a problem educating girls to not get in those situations...like my mom, always had me roleplay when I way little so I knew what to do...but because they're guys and they're teenage guys its always gonna be a problem” (2)

**Health and Body Image.** Dating and sexual pressures as well as body changes creates other pressures. One theme that emerged centered

around body image, and the high costs for girls in terms of eating disorders and panic attacks.

"There is peer pressure of what you should weigh, how tall you should be, to look a particular way, to have sex." (1)

[Body image] is so negative with media pictures air-brushed (1)

"So many people at my school don't exercise or eat well and feel bad about themselves. But they don't do anything about it." (1)

"Eating disorders are a problem. There is pressure to look a certain way. Body image is a health issue." (1)

"girls who refrain from eating and always doing exercise just to lose weight and be skinny so eating disorders and body image" (2)

"yeah, like girls just keeping all their emotions in and it usually leads to panic attacks and eating disorders" (2)

***Peer Pressure and Bullying.*** Peer pressure and bullying were described by the girls as a pervasive problem that ranged from pressure to fit in to active bullying that can come from friends as well as those who deliberately target you.

"Friend/peer pressure -"Pressure to spend money to fit in with anything in fashion. But there is a gap in amount of money to spend on it." (1)

"if some of their friends wear like different style of clothes, they change their style and do what their friends wanna do, and they're more quiet because their friends don't think they're cool." (2)

"There is negative peer pressure: Those without self-esteem tend to decrease the self-esteem of others with good self-esteem. Having good self-esteem can make you a target for bullying." (1)

[Bullying.] "Some people try to embarrass you on purpose. People talk about your clothes, what they don't like about you, there is teasing." (1)

"some girls are more worried about what other people think of them and how they dress...like how they'll be viewed by other people instead of what they like" (2)

***Academic Pressures.*** In addition to peer pressure and bullying, girls also felt considerable academic pressure to succeed. Today's girls are keenly aware that they are now expected to excel just as the boys are, and that competition is fierce.

"The pressure to be successful. It is harder and harder for women to get into college because more women go to college than men . It is expected that women should excel and have high achievement." (1)

"The standards to get into college have risen and continue to rise - and there is more competition." (1)

***Family Stress.*** While families were clearly valued as a resource and a support, girls felt that families could also be a source of additional stress and that it was hard to find someone to talk to about problems.

"Finding someone to talk to about everything. Parents and guidance counselors aren't always really there." (1)

"stress, some people have family issues" (2)

"pressure from parents to do well in school, to always do the right thing, clean your room, keep up with your homework, keep up your grades and have a social life and everything" "pressure for a perfect life" (2)

"money...like money is a stress factor...usually its for parents but now there is so much pressure to have the right clothes you need money...and its really hard if you don't have money" (2)

"stress from parents to make you wear something different...if your parents want you to wear more dresses instead of guy shorts or guy pants...or if you don't want to get your ears pierced but don't want to. "you're trying to change identities but be yourself at the same time" (2)

"parents sometimes don't remember" "like they don't get you at all" (2)

***Self Esteem and Mental Health Issues.*** The girls were very focus on the costs of these pressures. Many stressed how all of these pressures can create problems in self-esteem for girls.

"Self esteem. If you don't have good self-esteem, it feeds into every pressure that we've talked about - if you're not confident, you're at risk for everything else. " (1)  
[Mental health.] "OCD and depression can be big problems for some girls." (1)

***Drugs and Alcohol.*** Girls also felt that the easy availability of drugs

and alcohol was a problem, even impacting girls in the schools.

'Underage drinking is a problem." (1)

"Easy access to drugs at school" (1)

[Drugs]. " A lot of people do them at school and it only takes using them once for it to become a problem. There are very few people there to stop you, and there is easy access to drugs." (1)

Unfortunately, the schools and guidance counselors did not provide a supportive environment where girls felt safe from drugs and alcohol.

"There should be better anti-drug enforcement - especially at schools, if one person was targeted/enforced it would help deter others. I don't know if the administration really knows. I think they must, but don't seem to be aware. They need to be more aware. (1)

"People don't hide doing drugs - there seems to be a reluctant acceptance." (1)

***Relationships Among Girls.*** While girls had stated that they found Girl Scouting to be helpful in building teamwork and support, relationships among girls was also potentially problematic due to jealousy.

"There is jealousy between girls. Girls are bound to fight, compete with each other." (1)

**Summary.** Overall, these girls displayed a relatively sophisticated understanding of public policy issues and problems at the national and the local and community levels. They also identified a set of problems specific to teenage girls like themselves for which they need help from the adults around them.

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## D. How Girls Envision Taking Action

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*The fourth question is how would you suggest making a change on these issues?*

In addressing this question, girls in both focus groups demonstrated a relatively sophisticated understanding of how to make change starting at the grassroots. They also identified gaps in the adults and leaders in their lives who have failed to address these issues. However, the girls aspired to leadership themselves and had concrete ideas about how to make changes themselves.

**Public Education.** When asked about what is needed to make a change on these national and local issues, as well as issues that affect girls in their daily lives, a major theme that emerged was the need for public education.

Most of these comments focused on issues that the girls cared deeply about and ones where there is a lack of knowledge.

"with eating disorders, some girls just think of it as a way to lose weight and they don't know all the side effects and long-term damage" (2)

"I actually had an eating disorder, I didn't eat for three days, I did that once and I actually gained weight ... and a lot of people don't know that their body goes into shut down mode and starts to eat your organs..." (2)

"dog fighting - education" [she did a slide show and she heard later that girls went home crying and later adopted pets from a shelter] (2)

[Second hand smoke] "like if you did seminars and stuff to educate smokers they would know that it was as bad as smoking" (2)

**Making Public Education Effective.** According to girls, this public education should involve families, and also educate using effective information rather than just saying not to do something.

"Most teenagers don't listen to the idea of not having sex, sex ed classes need to educate you more about it. They need to do more than just tell you not to have it; including [giving information about] contraception. " (1)

[In terms of obesity, sweets should be a treat that you work for rather than always available] "in my family, every time you get candy or something sweet it's a reward for

something. Every time you wanted something like cake or pie, you had to make it..." (2)

**Addressing Gender Violence.** Girls believe that education around gender violence is important as well. This would include others who can help protect girls in social situations as well as the media.

"There should be more awareness of rape and gender violence and situations that they can't control that might lead to teen pregnancy in dating situations." (1)

"if you're dating then be in a place with more people, with a lot of people and a lot of witnesses" (2)

"The media needs to do more to promote better understanding about the problems with drugs, sex too soon, and drinking less. They make it seem cool and they could provide a more realistic image." (1)

**Leadership Gaps and Resources.** When asked about what adults might be able to help on making a change and taking action, girls pointed out that it is not always obvious who can or will help. Parents, families, guidance counselors, and public officials were mentioned as leaders who could help. In some cases, however, girls did not feel confident that adults in their lives or in the public sector would listen to them.

***Parents and Guidance Counselors.*** Girls identified parents and guidance counselors as possible adults who could help.



"Sometimes people aren't sure who you can talk to. Guidance counselors should be more available as someone to talk to, not just for scheduling, college admissions, etc. - they need to provide support." (1)

Counselors at my school are really good at listening. I had a problem with a friend and they helped me work it out. (1)

"Maybe like a parent or a guidance counselor who can talk to you, whose been through it before" (2)

"Parents" (1)

"Older siblings may not be able to help you directly, but they can help you through it." (1)

"Family (older siblings/other family members/aunts) can be helpful." (1)

***Public Sector Leaders.*** In addition to parents and guidance counselors in the schools, girls stressed that leaders in the public sphere who will take action are needed.

"people with power...they'll probably have contact with people you need to talk to...people who are well known almost like celebrities." (2)

"[like she said] people with power, people that will listen and go through with it rather than people who will listen and say they'll do something but never do." "they're gonna try to do something about it" (2)

**Leadership Gaps.** One of the problems is that girls lack confidence that leaders and the adults in their lives will listen to girls about these problems.

"No one listens to us. We could tell someone directly that you should or shouldn't do this/that, but no one would listen." (1)

"I feel like some situations we will [be listened to] and some we won't...it kinda depends on the situation" (2)

"There is an age gap. And they have more seniority. They have different ways of thinking. They might have the same idea but have different ways to get there. Any they might not respect your opinion." (1)

"I think it's really awkward to talk to my parents about this stuff." (1)

"We worry that they [parents] will judge you, be shocked at your behavior [rather than looking at the social problems]. They will ask how did you get in that situation? They focus on the problem and not the solution." (1)

"[it depends on] who they know and what they're good with...if you have a parent that's very good with stopping dog fighting, for example, then they can help you....but if they have no experience in stopping dog fighting, they can support you but they can't really help you...until you get to a point [with enough growth] they can only support you" (2)

"Parents would probably still support if they found out their teen was pregnant. It may be hard to talk to them and they will be disappointed, but they'll be helpful." (1)

***Organizing with Others to Make a Change.*** Nonetheless, girls clearly have well-formed ideas about how they might work to achieve change. One suggestion was to organize.

"email...facebook" "well first I would say get a bunch of people together who would agree with you and then get attention from more official people like the president or congressman..." (2)

"for like minor issues, like challenges and issues for girls and things you can change, on facebook they actually have groups that say I believe in this that you can send to your friends....and if you get so many people to agree with you - you get something..." (2)

"if it's like a problem that kids like us think about, you could get a group together who could help" (2)

***Using the Media.*** Another suggestion was to approach the media.

"you could get contact a news channel and ask them to talk about it, talk about the situation and so people actually start to think about it." (2)

***Working With Other Girls.*** Girls mentioned friendship among girls as a positive factor.

[Self esteem] "If you have a friend who has really low self-esteem, you can compliment her and help her realize her value, self-worth. You can encourage friendship among girls." (1)

[Friends] "like what if you are forced into that situation, they knew what to do...they were forced into a situation but they knew what to do" (2)

[It helps] "having good friends who you can go to for anything" (2)

**Making a Change: Aspirations to Leadership.** Girls do aspire to make changes that address these problems.

"I would like to be part of a group that's working to change all that." (1)

"I've always wanted to be a teacher because I like teaching people and educating them." (2)

"Being a babysitter [ helps] because most parents get stressed when they can't get time off and get time alone; an author because some kids don't usually have kids to read and if I get my book published I'll start giving them away to homeless kids so they can start reading and learn how to read so they don't....can get a job..." (2)

"Organizing a union of vegetarians...I've been a vegetarian since I was six and I'm a really strong believer....like if you look at the treatment of the animals its really bad, they lock them up in cages and feed them hormones and end up back in humans, like my mom recently got diagnosed with breast cancer and we don't have a family

history of breast cancer." (2)

"Well I probably want to bring more awareness to some of the more rarer diseases that people and children can have"  
(2)

"I actually want to go around to schools and educate them about drunk driving and I lost an uncle to drunk driving so it's something I really care about." (2)

"My father used to drink a lot and was a drug addict" so it's something I want to work on [educating people] (2)

**Understanding Public Policy Problems.** Girls also showed an awareness of the complexity of addressing public policy problems – that even social problems also stem from how communities seek to solve problems.

"A leader for these issues is harder to find. Some of these things are considered okay to have - gangs could have started out as a cultural gathering, a group of similar people that couldn't find a way to connect. After years, it was seen as a bad things - different groups had conflict with each other and gang violence started. We always see the negative but they addressed a problem. In some sense, it gives a sense of family to those who lack it." (1)

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## **CONCLUSIONS**

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Girls – as shown in these two focus groups – have strong and articulate voices for themselves and their communities. They understand what leadership is on a variety of levels – at the national level and at the local levels. Girls have a distinctive definition of leadership based in working with and for others, as well as an understanding of leadership character that is both personal and oriented towards public policy problems. These girls identified distinct problems and issues that affect the country, their communities, and a set of pressures and problems specific to teenage girls. Like most Americans, girls see the economy as the most important national problem. But at the local metropolitan area, community disunity and violence emerged as the most important problem. Safety for girls was mentioned as both a national and a local problem, as well as an issue that emerged for girls like them.

Girls as revealed in these focus groups are very vocal about the distinctive problems that girls must navigate as teenagers. Most prominently mentioned were gendered issues encountered in adolescence as they navigate their path to adulthood (e.g., dating and sexual pressures, peer pressure and bullying, body image, self-esteem and mental health). In addition, girls also face new challenges in today's society which reflect new competitive stresses for girls (e.g., academic pressure to succeed) as well as greater stresses within families and problems of alcohol and drugs.

Problems that affect teenage girls specifically as described here are

potentially very damaging, but Girl Scouting, other girls, and ideas that the girls have themselves show that these girls envision change and taking action for themselves. While girls say that they are not sure that the adults and leaders in their lives are aware of the problems that they face as girls, these girls also envision making changes and providing leadership themselves.

Girls believe that public education, including effective public education within their communities and families can make important social changes to address problems. Addressing gender violence emerged as an important theme.

Girls, as is evident here in these focus groups, clearly seek more women as role models, and more adults in their lives who will show leadership to address issues which impact them as girls and their communities. In addition to seeking women that girls can look up to, girls also specifically mentioned parents, family members and guidance counselors as well as leaders in the public sector who could provide greater leadership on not only public problems facing the nation and their communities, but also for the distinctive problems faced by girls. Overall, these girls expressed strong, articulate, and well-informed voices for the distinctive needs, concerns, and problems faced by girls in the Washington, DC, metropolitan area.