

Criminalizing Bresha Meadows – A Teach-In

Goals:

1. To understand the connection between domestic violence and the criminalization of girls/young women.
2. To understand the factors that led to Bresha Meadows’s criminalization.

Agenda Outline:

Content	Format	Time
1. Introductions & Overview	Presentation	15 minutes
2. Defining Criminalization	Large group discussion	15 minutes
3. Timeline Activity	Gallery Walk (pairs) or Small Group Discussion	35 minutes (can be shortened to 20 minutes)
4. Bresha’s Story	Large group discussion	30 minutes
5. Writing Activity (optional)	Individual and large group discussion	30 minutes
6. Closing		5 minutes
	TOTAL TIME	2 hours and 10 minutes (130 minutes)

Materials Needed:

Flip chart and markers
 Timeline cards and tape
 Copies of “Bresha’s story”
 Copies of Domestic Violence and the Criminalization of Girls Fact Sheet
 Copies of “The Prison Cell” poem (if you will be doing the writing activity)
 Loose leaf paper and pens (if you will be doing the writing activity)
 List of local domestic violence and sexual assault resources

Introductions (15 minutes)

Name, gender pronouns, why you are here at this teach-in.

Special note to facilitator: *You will certainly have survivors of domestic and other forms of violence in the room. Make sure that you have a list of local domestic violence and sexual violence resources with you so that you can share those with people who might need them as they leave. Also, make sure that you tell everyone at the start of the teach-in/workshop that if they find themselves feeling overwhelmed, it's OK to get up and take a break. If you have a local DV organization in your community, you might want to ask if they might send a counselor to your teach-in so the person can be on site in case people need support during the session.*

Defining Criminalization (15 minutes)

Facilitator instructs: We are going to create a mindmap as a group to get a sense of how we collectively understand youth criminalization.

1. Facilitator writes YOUTH in a circle in the middle of flip chart paper or blackboard.
2. Facilitator asks:
 - a. Who are the most important people in the lives of children and young people? [Note to facilitators: write the participants' answers outside of the circle that says youth – create a second circle around the answers.]
 - b. “What are the key institutions that have an impact on young people’s lives? Courts, DCFS, Schools, Families, Church, Police, Businesses, Media, Health Care, etc... [Note to facilitators: write the participants’ answers outside of the circle about most important people – create a third circle around these answers – so your map should look like a set of concentric circles]
 - c. How do/can these institutions contribute to the criminalization of young people? For ex, schools can excessively suspend and expel children and youth pushing them to drop out which increases their likelihood of ending up coming into contact with the criminal punishment system.
 - d. Based on our mind map, what is criminalization?

Criminalization is "the process by which behaviors and individuals are transformed into crime and criminals." Previously legal acts may be transformed into crimes by legislation or judicial decision.

“Criminalization is a process by which certain practices that had been legal are made illegal. By defining activities associated with certain groups as criminal, those groups themselves come to be seen and treated as dangerous, often justifying extreme and subtle violence against those people.

The process does not happen in a vacuum, but rather is a strategy in the continued oppression of marginalized groups – people of color, the poor, women, youth, LGBTQ, the disabled, etc...

Criminalization is not simply the creation of new laws and punishments, but includes also socially defining certain practices (or ways of being) as criminal. We understand the criminalization of youth to be not only legislation to restrict the rights and activities of young people, but a web of cultural impressions, practices, and myths through which youth generally – and especially youth of color – come to be viewed as generally criminal by dominant culture.” – (source: Prison Activist Resource Center, Criminalization of Youth Presenter’s Packet).

Facilitator Background Information [This is information that you can use to supplement the discussion if you feel it is needed]:

According to sociologist Victor Rios, “criminalization was a central, pervasive and ubiquitous phenomenon that impacted the everyday lives of the young people [he] studied in Oakland.” He adds:

“By the time they formally entered the penal system, many of these young men were already caught up in a spiral of hypercriminalization and punishment. The cycle began before their first arrest — it began as they were harassed, profiled, watched, and disciplined at young ages, before they had committed any crimes. Eventually, that kind of attention led many of them to fulfill the destiny expected of them.”

Rios defines hypercriminalization as “the process by which an individual’s everyday behaviors and styles become ubiquitously treated as deviant, risky, threatening, or criminal, across social contexts.”

“This hypercriminalization, in turn, has a profound impact on young people’s perceptions, worldviews, and life outcomes. The youth control complex creates an overarching system of regulating the lives of marginalized young people, what I refer to as punitive social control.

Hypercriminalization involves constant punishment. Punishment, in this study, is understood as the process by which individuals come to feel stigmatized, outcast, shamed, defeated, or hopeless as a result of negative interactions and sanctions imposed by individuals who represent institutions of social control.”

Timeline Activity (20 to 40 minutes)

Facilitator points (5 minutes):

- This timeline provides a look at issues of criminalization of girls and young women.
- REMIND participants this is not an exhaustive review of every single issue related to the criminalization of girls and young women but is only a sampling of select events. Tell them that they will be invited to add what they know and think is important to this history on the timeline.
- Exercises like this are helpful because they show the historic and current ways that people and communities are impacted by government, political events, and cultural events.
- Timelines are also a way to share our history of resistance, and tell the story of the ways people affected by these issues have fought back in small and big ways and have succeeded in creating social change.

There are at least three ways that you can structure this activity depending on group size, space, etc...

If you have a lot of wall space and want to streamline the activity, you can set it up as a gallery walk. You can do small group discussion. Or you can make it a very streamlined activity.

I. Gallery Walk Version (35 minutes total)

[**Preparation:** Before your teach-in begins, post timeline cards on your walls in chronological order.]

Facilitator instructs: Find a partner, ideally someone who you don't know, and tour the timeline. Feel free to chat as you tour, once you're done take a seat. **15 min**

Debrief Timeline – **20 min** (Large group or in pairs)

Once everyone is done touring, ask the following questions to help surface what participants saw and learned.

Flip chart the following questions, one per page. Write up people's answers as the discussion moves forward:

- What did you learn or what was surprising about the timeline?
- What's missing from the timeline? What would you add?

II. Small Group Version (35 minutes)

[Preparation: Prior to beginning the teach in – create a timeline on a wall starting from pre-1800 to 2016. Leave enough room for participants to post cards under and/or above the dates.]

Facilitator instructs: Break up into groups of at least 2 people. I will be giving you some cards with historical information on them. [Note to facilitators: there are 26 cards included in this curriculum. Depending on the number of participants in your teach in, hand out enough cards per group to allow for all groups to have at least a couple of cards. You should also be sure to hand out blank post-it notes so that groups can add their own historical moments to the timeline, should they choose.]

1. Read the cards and discuss them with your partner/group:
 - a. Is this information that you already knew?
 - b. Is this new information?
 - c. If the info is not new, what more can you share with your partner/group about this era?
 - d. If it is new, what strikes you as important/interesting about this information?
2. After you've discussed the historical moments, please paste them on the timeline in the appropriate era. Also you can add other information that you know about other historical moments that may not already be represented on the timeline.
3. I am going to ask for a volunteer from each pair or group to come up and discuss the historical moments that they posted on the timeline.

At the end of the activity, facilitator says: “Now that we have filled out the timeline, what do you notice is a reoccurring theme?”

III. Streamlined Timeline Activity (limited time and space, 20 minutes)

There are some instances where facilitators might want to include some historical background but are pressed for time or perhaps have limited space. In that case, you can do a streamlined version of the timeline activity.

1. Give out 8 to 10 timeline cards to 8 to 10 different participants. [Note to facilitator: make sure that you pre-select the events that you think will best illustrate how girls/young women have been criminalized throughout history.]
2. Review the timeline in chronological order by asking participants to come up and present/explain the event/historical moment they have and place it on the timeline (on a wall, blackboard, etc.).

At the end of the activity, facilitator says: “Now that we have filled out the timeline, what do you notice is a reoccurring theme?”

Bresha's Story (30 minutes)

1. Handout copies of "Bresha's Story." Facilitator instructs participants to silently read the story. After a few minutes, ask for volunteers to read it out loud.
2. When reading is done, ask the following questions:
 - a. What happened?
 - b. What are the factors that led to Bresha's criminalization? What are the systems that negatively impacted her life path?
 - c. Were there any positive forces in her life?
 - d. Were there any points where a positive intervention might have made a difference for her?
 - e. What alternative ways could this incident have been handled?

Facilitator Points:

1. A significant number of girls in the criminal punishment system have prior histories of sexual and physical abuse; they come from families where they may have witnessed violence; they are suffering from depression; they are poor, disproportionately from racial minority groups; they transgress gender identity norms and are punished for it; some are battling addiction; and many are under-educated.
2. Use the Domestic Violence and the Criminalization of Girls/Young Women Fact Sheet to share key information and statistics with participants.

Writing Activity (30 minutes -- optional)

1. Read poem "The Prison Cell" by Mahmoud Darwish. Facilitator can read it out loud first and then invite volunteers to read the poem a second time.
2. Darwish suggests that as long as our minds are free, human-made prisons cannot contain our imaginations. Ask participants the following questions [Note to facilitators: you can hand out paper and pens so that they can write down their responses or you can do a public brainstorm and write their answers collectively on flip charts with markers]:
 - a. What does freedom mean to you? What does freedom feel like, taste like, smell like? In what ways do you have freedom?
3. Next, invite participants to share their freedom dreams for Bresha. Invite them to use Darwish's poem as inspiration. You can use the prompts:
 - a. Bresha, I dream of you being free...
 - b. I wish you freedom to...

- c. My freedom dreams for you Bresha are...
- 4. If you have time, ask for volunteers to share what their freedom dreams are for Bresha with the group.

Closing (5 minutes)

Thank everyone for coming. Share information about how they can keep up with the #FreeBresha Campaign (**freebresha.wordpress.com**).