

THE *Current*

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A Question of Justice

A 13-year-old girl sits on her bed. It consists of little more than a black metal frame and a thin mattress covered in blue cloth. The walls around her are grimy and bare. Her back is to the camera. “I have two more months in here,” she says. “I’m in for VOP (violation of parole). My mom visits, but my dad is locked up at Sing Sing.”

If pictures speak louder than words, award-winning photographer Richard Ross’ images of adolescent and teenage girls ensnared in the country’s juvenile justice systems are nothing softer than a roar.

In his new book, “Girls In Justice,” Ross, a professor of art at UC Santa Barbara, shows the stark reality of girls confined to detention centers. They range in age from 11 to 18, and most are there for low-level crimes — simple assaults; public order, property, drug or status offenses; or technical violations.

And most — nearly 75 percent — are victims of physical and sexual violence. As compared to boys, Ross noted, girls in custody report nearly twice the rate of past physical abuse, twice the rate of past suicide attempts and four times the rate of prior sex abuse.

“A lot of them are here because there’s no place else for them to go,” said Ross. “Much of the judicial system feels handcuffed by the lack of proper facilities in the community for girls, and many feel they have no recourse but detention.”

And that, he added, simply “kicks the can down the road” by failing to address the circumstances that landed the girls in detention in the first place.

“When a judge says to a girl, ‘I have to put you in detention,’ I think, ‘Whatever the length of time, at the end of it, where are you going to put her that’s different from where she is today?’” Ross noted. “And I really wonder, is it the role of a judge to keep a kid safe, or is it the role of a judge to enforce the law? I don’t know.”

Ross has become a de facto expert on the subject of girls in detention, having visited over 300 sites across the country and interviewed more than 1,000 kids. “It’s a story that has to be told, and I seem to be the one who’s able to act as a conduit for these very fragile voices from these families that have no resources, from communities that have no power,” he said.

All projects have their DNA in something else, and “Girls In Justice” is ultimately rooted in Ross’ project “Architecture of Authority,” which looks at architectural spaces that exert power over the individuals — oftentimes children — within them. That in turn led to “Juvenile In Justice,” which documents the placement and treatment of juveniles in facilities that are meant to assist, confine and/or punish them. “Girls In Justice” redirects the spotlight to girls in the system.

Overall, arrest rates for juveniles have decreased across the country, but the percentage of girls in the system is increasing, Ross noted. “So it was natural for me to say I had to focus on girls,” he said. “And they’re much more victimized. I’m doing this to make people aware of what’s going on.”

Ross’ ultimate goal is to change legislation and, by extension, change the outcomes for children in detention. “And I want to do that by talking to the kids themselves,” he said. “My home institution of training is art, and maybe I’m able to make a difference for only one-half of one percent, but it’s unbelievably gratifying as an artist to be able to do it.”

With that in mind, Ross provides images free of charge to any organization championing the rights and treatment of youth. “I’m offering them to nonprofits for use in making their data and statistics more apparent that lives are in the balance,” he said.

The work requires a blend of artistic vision, sensitivity and a high degree of emotional intelligence, Ross added. “I sit on the floor of the cells and I listen to the kids. You have to know how to ask questions and you have to know how to listen,” he said. “And if a kid doesn’t want to talk to you, be patient. Because you know their day is a lot worse than yours.”

More information about “Girls In Justice” and “Juvenile In Justice” can be found at <http://www.richardross.net/juvenile-in-justice>.

A series of Ross’ images are currently on display at the UCSB Library in conjunction with UCSB Reads, an annual event that engages the campus and community in discussions about a key topic while reading the same book. This year’s selection is Piper Kerman’s “Orange Is the New Black.” The exhibition continues through May 29.

About UC Santa Barbara

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