



Trauma and Juvenile Offending

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Introduction

Over the past few decades, studies have shown a relationship between childhood abuse and neglect and juvenile justice system involvement. Additionally, the United States supervises and incarcerates more youth than other established country. This process—from abuse to incarceration—has become known as the abuse-to-prison pipeline or victimization-to-imprisonment. Many traumatized youth find themselves responding to their trauma with behaviors deemed delinquent (e.g., skipping school and running away) which then begins their path into the juvenile justice system. For a sub-set of youth, they are dual-involved, meaning, they are supervised in both the child welfare and juvenile justice systems. For some youth, their justice system pathway extends into adulthood with the criminal legal system. This poster highlights this literature while providing policy recommendations for change.

Literature Review

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

- Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) include ten areas of childhood abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction.
- Studies consistently find that as ACE score increases, so does the risk of involvement in the juvenile justice system (Baglivio et al., 2020).

Mental Health

- Youth with disorders such as depression and anxiety may act their emotions out through disruptive behaviors, resulting in justice system involvement (Hoeve & Wasserman, 2015).
- Approximately 40-80% of system youth have a diagnosable disorder which is much higher than the general population
- The prevalence rate of youth with disorders within these systems is consistently higher than those within the general population (Underwood & Washington, 2016).

Juvenile Justice System Prevalence

- More than 35,000 youth are incarcerated each year in the U.S. (Prison Policy, 2024).
- At any point in time, approximately 700 youth are detained for status offenses (e.g., running away); additionally, one in 11 youth are locked up in adult jails and prisons (Prison Policy, 2024).



Pathways

Dual-system Involvement

- “Crossover youth” is the most widely used term when referencing dual-system involvement—youth involved in both the juvenile justice and child welfare systems.
- These youth have endured more exposure to traumatic events and negative outcomes than non-system-involved youths (Modrowski et al., 2023).

Abuse-to-prison Pipeline

- Studies show many traumatized girls will engage in maladaptive coping, such as running away, leading to system involvement (Kempf-Leonard & Johansson, 2007).
- Girls in the system are disproportionately victims of sexual abuse, and many times, their reactions are criminalized (Terry & Williams, 2021).

Juvenile-to-adult Pathway

- Most youth age out of offending behaviors; however, a sub-set of youth continue a life of delinquent behavior leading them into the criminal legal system (NIJ, 2014).
- Transferring juveniles to the adult system holds harsher punishments (e.g., increased victimization) (NIJ, 2014).

Policy Recommendations

Proactive Options: Before Incarceration

- Schools can provide interventions to help address trauma, including attachment, competency, self-regulation, and cognitive behavioral therapy (Rhoden et al., 2019).
- Community mentoring programs can offer a support system to youth to help develop relationships in their communities (e.g., Bigs in Blue) (OJJDP, 2020).
- Functional Family Therapy (FFT) has been shown to reduce future delinquent behavior (Sexton & Turner, 2011).

Reactive Options: During/after Incarceration

- Service providers should be trained to incorporate a trauma-informed perspective (Ko et al., 2008).
- After their abuse(s), these youth could be taught coping skill development when responding to their trauma (McMackin et al., 2014).
- Reentry programs should work to maintain social relationships with one's family and institutions while addressing substance use issues, and educational and employment barriers (Gill & Wilson, 2017).

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