



Perspectives from Maryland's Dually-Involved Female Youth

"Listening to our stories is the first step."

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Childhood maltreatment is often a strong indicator for future juvenile justice involvement for any youth; however, female youth are particularly vulnerable. Though the population of female youth involved in the delinquency system is often smaller than that of males, a disproportionately high number of these young women are dually involved in the juvenile justice **and** child welfare systems. Despite their increased need for more intensive services and coordinated case planning, dually-involved female youth frequently slip through the cracks and ultimately do not receive the support they need from either system.

To better understand and appropriately address the unique experiences and service needs of Maryland's dually-involved female youth, Advocates for Children and Youth has interviewed 20 young women with prior involvement in both the child welfare and juvenile justice systems. This paper will present the results of the interviews and make several recommendations for how to better serve this population.

BACKGROUND

In Maryland, a significant number of females become involved in the juvenile justice system each year. In 2012, the Department of Juvenile Services (DJS) screened 8,978 cases involving young women with the majority of them being between the ages of 14 and 17.¹ While it is difficult to identify the number of dually-involved youth at all stages of the juvenile justice system, we do know that female dually-involved youth are over represented among the youth committed to the custody of DJS.² For example in 2012, 39 percent of female youth placed in a Department of Juvenile Services out-of-home placement had a history of physical or sexual abuse—over triple the rate for males.³ While we do not know how many of these youth had open child welfare cases at the time of their involvement with the juvenile justice system, their high rates of maltreatment reflect their vulnerability to becoming dually-involved.

Recognizing the need to learn more about the lives of dually-involved females in Maryland, Advocates for Children and Youth conducted 20 one-on-one interviews with women who have prior histories of juvenile justice and child welfare involvement. The purpose of these interviews was to gain a better understanding of the circumstances that caused them to become dually involved and the measures that could have been used to prevent it.

METHODOLOGY

Advocates for Children and Youth's target population for this study was female youth, over the age of 18, with prior histories of child welfare involvement and any degree of contact with juvenile justice system. To identify and contact participants that fit these criteria, Advocates for Children and Youth partnered with Youth Opportunity (YO!) Baltimore and the Maryland Foster Youth Resource Center. Both are community-based organizations that provide direct services to current and former foster youth. Other interview participants were referred to the study by their Department of Social Services caseworker or were identified through on-street recruitment.

¹ Maryland Department of Juvenile Services. (2012). *Data resource guide: Fiscal Year 2012*. Retrieved from: http://www.djs.state.md.us/drg/DRG_2012_Whole_book_with_Pullouts_updated_recidivism_data.pdf

² One challenge to accurately counting the number of dually-involved female youth is that many girls involved in the child welfare system might have contact with the delinquency system that does not rise to the level of becoming formally committed to DJS. As a result, there may be many more girls with child welfare histories that come into contact with the juvenile justice system via avenues that do not always result in a formal DJS commitment, such as arrest, intake, or diversion.

³ Female youth committed to DJS out-of-home placements were also more likely than their male counterparts to have histories of neglect, running away or being kicked out of the home. Maryland Department of Juvenile Services (2013). *2012 JCR response: Girls services implementation plan and report on placement disparities update*.

The goal of the interviews was to capture each woman's perspective on the circumstances that led to her becoming dually involved and the perceived measures that would have prevented her from crossing over. Each interview included questions regarding the:

- Age at which she first become involved in each system
- Circumstances surrounding her involvement in each system
- Adjustment to being system-involved
- Level of contact she had with her biological family
- Interventions that might have prevented her encounters with the delinquency system

Once the interviews were completed, they were coded for demographic data and overall patterns pertaining to their service needs.

DEMOGRAPHICS

Age and Ethnicity

The age of the young women interviewed ranged from 18 – 24, with the average age at the time of the interview being slightly over 20 years old. Ninety percent of the girls identified as Black, with five percent identifying as White or Asian American.

Involvement in the Child Welfare System

The age range during which the young women first became involved in the child welfare system was from birth to 17 years old. However, the average age for their initial contact with the child welfare system was 9.3 years old.

Of the 80 percent of girls that experienced **multiple** out-of-home placements, nine was the average number of placements for each. Three participants experienced between 14 – 27 placements each; seven girls experienced less than 10 placements. Six girls did not specify the number of placements.

Onset of Delinquent Behavior and Extent of Juvenile Justice Contact

Participants reported that their delinquent behavior began between the ages of 11 – 17 with the average age being 13.1 years old. For most girls, their first contact with law enforcement or the juvenile justice system coincided with the onset of the offending behavior, with the average age of contact being 13.7 years old.

The extent of each girl's involvement with the juvenile justice system varied—some were committed to secure detention facilities while others received verbal warnings from law enforcement officials. Though the extent of juvenile justice contact varied widely, recidivism was consistent across most participants. There were multiple instances of delinquent behavior and juvenile justice contact among 80 percent of the cases.

Mental Health and Substance Abuse Needs

Not all participants provided information regarding their mental health or substance abuse. However, a significant number of girls reported mental health issues that coincided with their involvement in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems. Fifty-five percent of participants cited mental health needs, with nine out of the 11 girls reporting that they struggled with depression or suicidal tendencies.⁴ Thirty percent of the girls volunteered information about substance use with most reporting marijuana or alcohol abuse throughout their adolescent years.

AT A GLANCE

- Average age of first contact with the child welfare system – 9.3 years old
- Average age of first contact with the juvenile justice system – 13.7 years old
- Average number of child welfare placements – 9.3 placements
- 80 percent experienced multiple out-of-home placements
- 55 percent reported mental health needs

⁴ Other reported mental health issues included: ADHD, Bipolar Disorder, anxiety disorders and anger issues.

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1) Value Youth Voice in all Parts of the Process

The most consistent theme to emerge from the interviews was the importance of truly listening to youths' perspectives. Seventy percent of the young women interviewed felt that their concerns and problems were unheard by the adults in their lives. As a result, they emphasized the importance of taking the time to listen to youths' stories and get to the root of their offending behavior. It is essential that the youth voice is valued, actively solicited and—most importantly—infused into all aspects of their involvement within the child welfare and juvenile justice systems.

“ Listen to young women's stories. They are not bad people. They are people born into bad situations. ”

Participant #16, age 20, when asked how to better serve young women that are dually involved

2) Improve Access to Age and Gender Appropriate Services

Seventy-five percent of the young women reported the need for increased access to additional support services. More specifically, 45 percent felt that they would have been more prepared for the transition into adolescence and adulthood if they had better life skills, financial literacy and independent living experience. To help female dually-involved youth prepare for their futures, it is important to engage youth in a proactive and robust transition planning process that will help them acquire the skills they need to live successful and stable adult lives.⁵

“ We have vulnerabilities...we need services to help with those things before we go to jail. ”

Participant #18, age 24, when asked how to better serve young women that are dually involved

Additionally, 55 percent of the girls felt that they would have benefitted from other types of supportive services apart from transition planning. For example, five of the 11 young women said they needed more women's therapy or counseling groups to help them handle stress and understand the causes of their behavior.⁶

3) Promote Permanent Relationships

Permanent relationships and long-term support networks are important protective factors that prevent youth from becoming dually involved in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems. Accordingly, 65 percent of the young women that were interviewed emphasized the importance of social stability, positive peer role models and/or lasting relationships with their biological families. Missing their family of origin or running away from out-of-home placements to see them was reported in 10 out of the 20 cases. The need to connect with positive role models and other youth who have had similar experiences was reported in 40 percent of the cases, eighty-five percent of which specifically reported that mentoring would have helped prevent them from crossing over.

4) Increase Stability in Out-of-Home Placements

Out-of-home placement is one of the key risk factors for dual involvement. Every participant that was interviewed experienced at least one out-of-home placement, with some girls experiencing more than 10.⁷ Furthermore, 30 percent of the young women discussed the importance of—and the need for—stability in their living situations. Stable home and school placements, as well as the maintenance of familial and social networks, should be prioritized in any effort to prevent female youth from becoming dually involved.

“ As she became older, she felt like a nomad that was unwanted. She never felt stable in her placements. ”

Participant #8, age 20, when asked about the challenges of adjusting to foster care

⁵ For more information on how to strengthen the transition planning process, see Advocates for Children and Youth. (2013). *Improving outcomes for former foster youth: Reducing homelessness and increasing financial literacy*. Retrieved from: <http://www.acy.org/upimages/READY%20BY%2021%20FINAL%281%29.pdf>

⁶ Other services identified as necessary included: services to help youth integrate with their foster families; recreation centers and other safe spaces for youth to get off the streets; and additional youth development programs.

⁷ Research has shown that three or more out-of-home placements doubles the amount of offending behavior in young men and any amount of out-of-home placements result in the same increase of offending behavior among young women. Widom, CS. (1992). The role of placement experiences in mediated the criminal consequences of early childhood victimization. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 61, p. 195-209

“ We are resilient and you should never give up on us. ”

Participant #17, age 18

NEXT STEPS

Advocates for Children and Youth is committed to making sustainable changes to policy and practice to help dually- involved female youth live successful and stable lives. We are doing the following:

- Convening a variety of stakeholders from across the state to develop and advocate for concrete recommendations to prevent dual involvement and improve treatment and service delivery
- Working to improve the overall case management and coordination through our involvement with the Prince George's County Crossover Youth Practice Model (PG-CYPM)
- Supporting the efforts of a Department of Juvenile Services workgroup charged with assessing existing statewide services and its effectiveness in meeting the needs of female offenders

Advocates for Children and Youth strives to elevate the voices of dually-involved girls in Maryland. In developing specific recommendations to better coordinate services for these youth, listening to these young women's stories is just the first step to ensuring a positive outcome for Maryland's dually-involved girls.

Advocates for Children and Youth will be developing and advocating for recommendations in the coming months. If you are interested in participating in our stakeholder meetings, please contact Melissa Rock at mrock@acy.org.