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Unique Risk Factors Signal Dual Involvement for Female Youth in Child Welfare and Juvenile Justice Systems

More Research Needed to Better Serve Population

Executive Summary

Youth who experience childhood maltreatment are more likely to engage in delinquent behavior and become involved in the juvenile justice system. Although the relationship between maltreatment and delinquency is well established, little research has addressed the specific risk factors and unique experiences of youth, particularly female youth, who are involved in both the child welfare and juvenile justice systems.

This increased risk warrants extra attention from child welfare and juvenile justice professionals. To better understand and serve this population, Advocates for Children and Youth will publish several briefs on the experiences of crossover youth in Maryland. As the first of several publications, this brief will provide an overview of existing research, outline some of the unique risk factors of female crossover youth generally, and highlight trends of female youth involved with the juvenile justice system in Maryland.

Background

Youth involved with child welfare and the juvenile justice system, referred to as crossover or dually-involved youth, require more intensive services than youth involved in a single system.¹ Yet despite the unique challenges they face, crossover youth often do not receive the coordinated services and case planning they need.² No single agency can provide the continuum of services required and cross-agency collaboration often faces significant structural and policy-oriented barriers. As a result, crossover youth frequently slip through the cracks of both systems and do not receive the support they need.

Compared to the overall population of young women involved in the juvenile justice system, a disproportionately high number of crossover youth are female, specifically girls and young women of color.³ Despite the overrepresentation of females involved in both systems, little research has been devoted to exploring this phenomenon at length. Research has either discussed females involved in a single system or has made no gender distinctions in works about crossover youth. However, figures suggest that females in the child welfare system have unidentified risk factors that make them more susceptible to juvenile delinquency and involvement with the juvenile justice system.

Risk Factors Associated with Females' Crossover Youth Status

A number of risk factors have been shown to increase the likelihood of female youth becoming known to both the child welfare and juvenile justice systems. While any one factor may increase the chances of a young woman becoming dually-involved, many crossover youth experience multiple risk factors in different areas of their lives.⁴ By viewing these risk factors as interrelated, child welfare and juvenile justice professionals can better understand the unique and complex needs of female crossover youth.

¹ Bilchik, S. and Nash, M. (2008). Child Welfare and Juvenile Justice: Two Sides of the Same Coin. *Juvenile and Family Justice Today, Fall 2008*, 16-20.

Herz, et al. (2012). *Addressing the Needs of Multi-System Youth: Strengthening the Connection Between Child Welfare and Juvenile Justice*. Washington, DC: Center for Juvenile Justice Reform.

² Herz, et al, 2012.

³ Bilchik & Nash, 2008. Herz, et al, 2012.

⁴ Bilchik & Nash, 2008.



Age of Abuse

The age a child is maltreated has been shown to be a predictor of later juvenile justice involvement. For instance, youth who experience maltreatment that begins in, or extends into, adolescence have been shown to develop more delinquent behaviors and psychosocial wounds than youth who have experienced maltreatment in early childhood only.⁵

Out of Home Placement

Research indicates a direct association between out-of-home child welfare placements and delinquency in female youth. While experiencing three or more out-of-home placements, offending behavior among young men doubled in both juveniles and adults while **any** amount of out-of-home placement resulted in the same increase in offending behaviors among young women.⁶ In addition to the number of placements, certain types of placement—such as group homes or kinship care—have been correlated with an increased likelihood of delinquent behavior and involvement in the juvenile justice system.⁷

Environmental and Social Instability

Abrupt changes in a youth's social environment have been shown to play a role in precipitating offending behavior. In addition to experiencing numerous out-of-home placements, events such as switching schools or changes to the family structure can also result in social and environmental instability. Instability paired with the challenges and trauma of maltreatment, contribute to crossing over into juvenile delinquency.⁸

A History of Trauma and Maltreatment

Adolescence is a time of great biological and cognitive development and many youth face challenges negotiating their physical, social, and emotional transition into adulthood. Because of the slower development of the brain's judgment center, adolescent youth face hormonal changes and difficulties in regulating emotion that increase their vulnerability to stress and risky behavior.⁹

While navigating these changes can be difficult for any youth, crossover youth often have histories of trauma and maltreatment that have lasting impacts on their cognitive and behavioral development and contribute to delinquent behavior.¹⁰ For example, a study that reviewed the medical charts of females in foster care with aggressive behavior revealed high incidences of physical and sexual maltreatment, extreme neglect and mental/behavioral health issues such as substance use.¹¹

Department of Juvenile Services-Involved Females in Maryland¹²

In 2011, the Maryland General Assembly passed legislation calling attention to the gender disparities in services offered by Maryland's Department of Juvenile Services (DJS). This legislation (SB 787/HB 511) required DJS to assess the services offered to females across the state and review how they compared to the programs provided to their male counterparts.

⁵ Smith, C.A., Ireland, T.O., and Thornberry, T.P. (2005). Adolescent maltreatment and its impact on young adult antisocial behavior. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 29, 1099-119. Thornberry, T.P. (2008, May 7). *Co-occurrence of problem behavior among adolescents*, Presented at Multi-System Approaches in Child Welfare and Juvenile Justice: Wingspread Conference.

⁶ Widom, C.S. (1992). The role of placement experiences in mediating the criminal consequences of early childhood victimization. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 61, 195-209.

⁷ Thornberry, 2008. Ryan, J.P., Marshall, J.M., Herz, D., and Hernandez, P. (2008). Juvenile delinquency in child welfare: Investigating group home effects. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 30, 1088-99.

⁸ Cashmore, J. (2011). The link between child maltreatment and adolescent offending: Systems neglect of adolescents. *Family Matters*, 89, 31-41.

⁹ Kros, F. (2013, January 13). Giving a fish a bath: The untold story of the adolescent mind. Presented at A Day with the Upside Down Organization - Prince George's County Homeless Youth Workgroup, Hyattsville, MD.

¹⁰ Bilchik & Nash, 2008.

¹¹ Dowdell, E.B., Cavanaugh, D.J., Burgess, A.W. and Prentky, R.A. (2009). Girls in Foster care: A Vulnerable and High-risk Group. *The American Journal of Maternal and Child Nursing*, 34, 172-178.

¹² Maryland Department of Juvenile Services. (2012). Report on female offenders: Statistical information of girls and an inventory of services. Retrieved from: <http://www.djs.state.md.us/docs/Girls.Feb.2012.Report.pdf>

Though the report focuses exclusively on youth involved in the juvenile justice system, it reflects trends found in the research on crossover youth outside of the state. More specifically, it reveals the increasing numbers of DJS-involved females in Maryland, highlights their increased rates of family-related needs, histories of abuse and out-of-home placements. The report also calls attention to the lack of female-only services.

Overall Demographics

- During fiscal year 2010, females made up 27.1% of intake cases throughout the state. While intake cases for females have decreased 15% over a 5-year period, female intakes are decreasing at a much slower rate than male intakes.
- Since fiscal year 2008, 2nd degree misdemeanor assault charges have been the most common offense for females. Other charges such as narcotics possession, theft and violating probation were also among the top causes for adjudication among females.

Placement Trends

- Of the youth who were committed, over 90% of females were admitted to in-state, out-of-home programs each fiscal year from 2008 to 2010, compared to just over half of DJS-involved males.
- Female youth consistently had at least double the rate of being placed in foster care, group homes, psychiatric hospitals, residential treatment facilities and therapeutic group homes as their male counterparts.

Needs Assessments of Committed Youth

- 90% of females placed in out-of-home programs had moderate to high family-related needs.
- 74.9% of females placed in out-of-home programs had moderate to high mental health-related needs, compared to only 57% of males.
- 46% had a history of physical or sexual abuse, over triple the rate for males.

Gender-Based Programming

- There are 198 services offered statewide for DJS involved youth. In total, only 21 served females exclusively, whereas 49 programs served males only.
- Of the 30 programs in Baltimore City, only 3 programs provided female-only services, two of which focused exclusively on pregnant and mothering teens.
- DJS's Female Intervention Team (FIT) is the only comprehensive program offering evidenced-based and multidimensional programming for females in Baltimore City. FIT has 8 case managers that serve approximately 300 female youth.

Conclusion

Highlighting the trends among DJS-involved females in Maryland, as well as identifying risk factors among crossover youth more generally, is the first step in understanding the unique characteristics and needs faced by this vulnerable population. More research is needed on determining the actual numbers of female crossover youth in Maryland, the policies and programs in place that serve them, and the factors that help these young women achieve positive results.

Committed to improving results for Maryland's youth in meaningful ways, Advocates for Children and Youth (ACY) continues to investigate the experiences of female crossover youth in Maryland in order to identify ways in which we can better serve these youth.