

Improving Delinquency Outcomes for Abused and Neglected Children: Changing the Paradigm Through Multi-System Collaboration

Shay Bilchik

Summary: We know that youth follow multiple pathways into the juvenile justice system. We also know that from an ecological perspective, they face risks and are provided protection in multiple domains: family, peer, school, community and self. This requires a multi-system response, particularly when that pathway begins with child abuse and neglect. Mr. Bilchik's presentation will explore this pathway in terms of prevalence and covariates and will present practice and system responses that serve to improve outcomes for this population of young people.

Review of Research: The information presented is drawn from decades of research on crossover youth (youth known to multiple systems of care) that has continually increased our knowledge on how to better address the needs of this population, as well as prevent crossover from occurring.¹ It is well known that being abused or neglected as a child greatly increases the likelihood of arrest as a juvenile and that between 9 and 29% of youth currently involved with child welfare become involved with the juvenile justice system. Some of the covariates associated with this crossover include the type of child welfare placement, with congregate care being associated with more delinquency referrals; the number of child welfare placements, with more substitute care placements resulting in greater delinquency referrals; and a lack of social bonds. Additionally, it has been found that maltreatment that starts in childhood and persists through adolescence and adolescence maltreatment alone is associated with a higher risk of delinquency.

Crossover youth tend to have high rates of mental health and substance abuse problems as well as problems in school, such as truancy and poor academic performance. Additionally, females and African American youth are overrepresented in the crossover youth population. Crossover youth also tend to enter the juvenile justice system at a younger age, penetrate the system more deeply and remain in the system longer than other juvenile justice involved youth. The result is that crossover youth can be among the most difficult, highest need, and costly youth served by child serving agencies.

Policy Implications: Increasingly, crossover youth research points to the necessity of multi-system collaboration to comprehensively address the risks and needs of crossover youth. The research conducted to date has stressed the need to:

- Intervene early and effectively in the lives of children who experience maltreatment to prevent delinquency,
- Bring systems together to intervene as early as possible when delinquency occurs,
- Identify crossover youth as early as possible to facilitate practice improvements for them, such as avoiding unnecessary incarceration,
- Have joint case handling to develop and manage a comprehensive, coordinated case plan,
- Ensure successful transition and permanency.

Without integrated and comprehensive efforts, crossover will continue to occur and crossover youth will continue to be less likely to receive the appropriate services and placements they need to improve their life outcomes. The Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act provides funding for collaborative efforts between juvenile justice and child welfare to prevent crossover youth from recidivating and requires that the two systems incorporate child welfare records into juvenile justice records to establish better treatment plans. The proposed 2010 legislation reauthorizing the JJDP Act adds in language that would encourage the collection of data on crossover youth to improve services provided to them. The Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act also provides language that supports collaboration. However, more needs to be done to support the development and implementation of promising multi-systems approaches that can be used to prevent crossover and better respond if it occurs.

¹ This knowledge predicated largely on the work done by Gene Siegel, Rachael Lord and Greg Halemba at the National Center for Juvenile Justice, Cathy Spatz Widom, Denise Herz, Joseph Ryan, and the Causes and Correlates research conducted by David Huizinga, Ph.D. (Denver), Rolf Loeber, Ph.D. (Pittsburgh) and Terence P. Thornberry, Ph.D (Rochester), among others.