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Traumatized Girls in the Juvenile Justice System

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Nationally, girls are increasingly entering the juvenile justice system is at a much faster rate than are boys.[1] In 2001, 28% of juveniles arrested were females. Between 1992 and 2001, boys saw a 21% decrease in arrests for aggravated assault, while girls saw a 24% increase. In the same time period, arrests for girls rose two times faster for drug violations, and four time faster for simple assault. As arrests for girls increase, so does the proportion of girls in juvenile detention facilities. The period from 1988 to 1997 saw a 65% increase of girls in the system nationwide,[2] while in Massachusetts, girls on probation increased 201% between 1992 and 2001, and female commitments to the Department of Youth Services increased 279%.[3] One of the primary reasons for the influx of girls into the juvenile justice system is that detention too often seems the only place of refuge the system has available for traumatized and abused girls.

Trauma histories

Physical and sexual abuse frequently play a significant role in getting girls involved with the justice system in the first place.[4,5,6] Girls in the juvenile justice system are more likely than boys to have abuse histories. Between 43% and 75% of antisocial girls have been sexually abused, compared to a rate of 12% in the general population[4]. Among incarcerated youths in one study,[6] 50% of the girls, versus 2% of the boys, reported histories of sexual abuse, while 42% of the girls versus 22% of the boys reported they had been physically abused. Preliminary analysis of national data from the MAYSI-2,[7] indicates that girls in juvenile corrections facilities do share some traumatic experiences with boys:

- 52% of the girls and 59% of the boys have witnessed someone severely injured or killed, and
- 47% of the girls and 55% of the boys have been badly hurt or in danger of being badly hurt.

However, girls more frequently had to face particularly terrifying circumstances:

- 70% of the girls versus 60% of the boys report that something very bad or terrifying has happened to them, and
- 45% of the girls versus 6% of the boys report they have been raped.

Moreover, girls more frequently report a hallmark symptom of posttraumatic stress:

- 39% of girls versus 30% of boys have had many "bad thoughts or dreams about a bad or scary event that happened to" them. [7]

Psychological and emotional damage

If a girl in juvenile detention has one psychiatric disorder, she is likely to have two or more,[8] and girls in the juvenile justice system are more likely than boys to have comorbid conditions. In 2003, 51% of the girls in the Texas juvenile justice system versus 43% of the boys had the potential for having two or more mental health problems.[9] Girls in juvenile detention are more likely than

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boys (57% vs. 46%, respectively) to have two or more of the following disorders:[10] major depressive, dysthymic, manic, psychotic, panic, separation anxiety, overanxious, generalized anxiety, obsessive-compulsive, attention-deficit/hyperactivity, conduct disorder, oppositional defiant, or substance use. Even after ignoring conduct disorder and substance use, more girls (34%) than boys (24%) were diagnosed with two or more disorders.

What can be done?

Currently, little exists in the way of specific trauma-focused screening and treatment for girls in the juvenile justice system. By the time a girl appears before a judge, the vast majority have a trauma history that would be an injustice to ignore.

Challenge: Because girls tend to react to victimization in ways that are less easily recognized as problematic, it may take longer to identify troubled girls, and those who do become involved with the juvenile justice system may be those who are the most troubled.

Strategy: Implement routine screening for trauma histories and related psychological symptoms by trained professionals when girls find themselves in mental health settings (e.g. school clinics), courts, or are at the start of a CHINS (Child In Need of Supervision) process.

Challenge: On the front end, when a girl is first brought to court, judges too often find themselves forced to make a choice between returning the girl to a chaotic and abusive home or placing her in "protective" custody in juvenile detention. On the other end, upon release from detention, there is generally no place for her to go except back to an abusive home life, increasing the probability of her quick return to the juvenile justice system, with additional experiences of abuse added to her history. Trauma-focused treatment for these girls does not currently exist. Difficulties with care coordination across service agencies also compounds the problem.

Strategy: A recently funded program, the Central Massachusetts Communities of Care (CMCC) represents an innovative approach to solving these challenges. CMCC is designed to serve youth with serious emotional disturbances at risk of court involvement and their families in family centers where youth will receive care management, care coordination, and working referral relationships with schools, police departments, state agencies and providers.

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