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McCoy's work looks closely at mental health and juvenile delinquency. She is currently researching strategies to promote mental health while decreasing the negative trajectories for juvenile offenders. To this research she brings years of social work practice experience with children, adolescents, and families in need of mental health services.

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IMPROVING SENTENCING OF JUVENILE OFFENDERS

Introduction

What factors contribute to mental health problems among juvenile offenders? Do these factors differ for boys, girls, and according to race?

The juvenile justice system has a high number of youth with diagnosable mental health disorders, many of whom have also had traumatic experiences. Some studies indicate that up to 93% of juvenile offenders have histories of trauma. This research explores some of the complex experiences and feelings of juvenile offenders that likely influence their behaviors and bring them to the attention of the juvenile justice system. Because experiences with trauma can lead to recklessness, poor impulse control, physical aggression, and feelings of anger and irritability, it is important for judges to consider how trauma influences youth when they are making decisions about juvenile justice cases.

This project uses scores from the Massachusetts Youth Screening Instrument version 2 (MAYSI-2), a mental health screening tool which measures young people's experience with trauma and its impact on their temperament. The MAYSI-2 is used in juvenile justice facilities across the U.S. to determine whether a juvenile offender requires a more extensive mental health assessment. The sample includes 1348 10-17 year old juvenile offenders held in a Midwestern detention facility between 2006 and 2010. The respondents are 86% male, 79% African American, and 17% White.

Findings

- Youth in juvenile detention have repeated exposures to trauma with as many as five experiences reported by some youth over the course of their lifetime. Boys most commonly reported two traumatic experiences (21%) while girls most frequently reported three traumatic experiences (22%). When examined by race, Black youth most commonly reported two (20%) or three (20%) traumatic experiences while White youth most frequently reported three traumatic experiences (23%).
- As the number of reported traumatic experiences increased, the likelihood of scoring higher on the anger/irritability (A/I) scale increased. Juveniles reporting one or more traumatic experiences were more likely than those reporting none to score high on the AI scale. In addition, girls reporting at least one traumatic experience were more likely than boys to score high on the AI scale. These findings suggest a strong relationship between experiencing trauma and having feelings of anger and irritability that can lead youth to have trouble with the juvenile justice system.

Recommendations

Given the high prevalence of traumatic experiences among juvenile offenders, sentencing guidelines should require that the influence of trauma be considered when it has been identified. The cyclical nature of giving harsher penalties without understanding the relationship between trauma and anger is likely a strong contributing factor to the seemingly endless cycle of recidivism. In particular, trauma-informed standards of care should be a part of a juvenile offender's ultimate disposition.



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