

Beyond Financial Support: The Importance of Acknowledging Trauma in Juvenile Justice Programs

Aania S. Underwood

Auburn University at Montgomery, USA

***Corresponding author**

Aania S. Underwood, Auburn University at Montgomery, USA

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ABSTRACT

What's the first thing that comes to mind when you hear "Juvenile Justice Program?" If you thought about rehabilitation, you're not alone, but unfortunately, the reality is often much different. Many Juveniles enter these programs already carrying deep emotional trauma, and instead of getting the help they need, they are sometimes met with abuse from staff members. This added mistreatment only worsens their mental state, causing them to shut down emotionally and feel even more powerless. The fear of speaking up is so intense that by the time victims come forward, their voices are often ignored or dismissed, making it even harder to seek justice and share their experiences. This resilience enables a system where abuse is hidden and ignored. In this paper, we will explore the mental health impacts of the juvenile justice system, the unequal effects on youth of color, the role of family involvement, and potential solutions to reform the system for the better.

Mental Health Issues in Juvenile Justice

The frequency of mental health issues among youth in the juvenile justice system is extremely high. Research continuously shows that youth within this system experience mental issues at significantly higher levels than their peers in the general population. In fact, "Estimates reveal that approximately 50 to 75 percent of the 2 million youth encountering the juvenile justice system meet criteria for a mental health disorder" (n.d.). These mental health challenges play a crucial role in the behaviors that lead to justice system involvement. Many of the disorders are common in this population are related with symptoms that increase the "risk of aggression is increased for many specific disorders and comorbid disorders because the emotional symptoms (i.e., anger) and self-regulatory symptoms (impulsivity) tend to increase the risk for antisocial or violent behavior" (n.d.). Youth offenders commonly present with a range of mental diagnosis, including "affective disorders (major depression, persistent depression, and manic episodes), psychotic disorders, anxiety disorders (panic, separation anxiety, generalized anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and post-traumatic stress disorder), disruptive behavior disorders (conduct, oppositional defiant disorder, and attention-deficit

hyperactivity disorder), and substance use disorders" (n.d.). These reoccurring conditions can complicate both their behavior and their treatments within the system, underestimating the urgent need for mental health intervention specifically to this endangered group.

Overcrowding and Middle-Level offenses

Overcrowding in Juvenile program facilities presents a difficult challenge, especially for youth charged with middle-level offenses, those who are not seen as a threat to society but are placed in the same facility as dangerous individuals. A study conducted at a Tennessee Juvenile Correctional Institution revealed "sudden increase in population (from 252 to 392 in 36 weeks)" [1]. During this period residents were more likely to show hostility and anger towards both staff and peers. The study also noted "Treatment programs were seriously impaired, if not totally useless, during times of crowding" [1]. Beyond behavior, overcrowding puts a heavy strain on institutional infrastructure. Increased population demands more attention, leading to staff burnout, limited resources, and heightened anxiety levels for everyone around. These conditions not only reduce rehabilitation efforts but may also increase the trauma many juveniles already experience.

Age and Development Impact

Understanding the development differences between juveniles and adults is important when examining their behavior within the justice system. Adolescents are still in the middle of critical brain development, which tremendously impacts their decision-making, impulse control, and emotional regulation. As much, their actions cannot be fairly judged by the same standards used for adults. “Whole Juveniles can be legally tried as adults, their brains are extremely different,” (Kinscherff). This distinction is foundational in the topic of juvenile justice. The adolescent brain, particularly the prefrontal cortex, the region responsible for reasoning, planning, and impulse control, is not fully developed. “One of the key differences between adult and adolescent brains, highlighted by Kinscherff, is the lack of prefrontal cortex development in young brains” [2]. This lack of development means that many young people do not yet have the neurological capacity to weigh consequences in the same way adults do. In addition to the underdeveloped prefrontal cortex, “two other brain systems that are key for understanding the adolescent brain include the social-emotional system and the cognitive control system” [2]. These systems are often in continuous change during adolescence, leading to heightened emotional responses and less stable judgement. The mix of neurological immaturity and environmental influences makes juveniles particularly open to trauma and peer pressure, which can influence their actions in intense ways. Furthermore, the legal suggestions of this science are significant. Woodland highlighted how adolescent defendants may have less criminal culpability than their adult counterparts based on the latest neuroscience. This shift in perspective shows that juveniles’ cognitive and emotional capabilities differ from those of adults, reinforcing the need for trauma-informed and developmentally appropriate responses within the justice system. Recognizing these developmental differences is not an excuse for criminal behavior but rather a call for justice systems to consider the full context of a juvenile’s actions, especially the presence of trauma and the biological realities of adolescence.

Racial Disparities and Statistics

Racial disparities within the juvenile justice system continues to be one of the most ongoing and troubling parts of youth incarceration in the United States. Despite growing awareness of failures within the system, children of color continue to be treated unequally, punished, and incarcerated compared to their white peers. Unequal treatment reflects a deeper issue within the justice system, one that continuously overlooks the trauma and systemic disadvantages that many youths of color face. From the article, Racial disparities in youth incarceration are the widest they’ve been in decades it states “We see that youth of color are just not given the leniency or the common-sense responses that white youth are given” (n.d.) [3]. This quote highlights a huge defect in the system’s approach to justice and rehabilitation. Rather than being met with compassion, understanding, or access to healing, children of color are continuously met with harsh measures that grows existing trauma and disconnect them further from their communities. Seen data supports this complete reality. Studies constantly show that children of color are treated more harshly in the justice system than their white peers. Federal

data released in 2023 states “Black children were nearly six times more likely to be incarcerated than white children; American Indian” (n.d.). These statistics not only reflect systemic bias but also underscore the urgency of applying trauma practices that account for the unique experiences of excluded youth. By failing to address these disparities and the underlying trauma many of these children endure, the juvenile justice system continues cycles of disadvantage and incarceration. Moving beyond financial support and into the concept of emotional, psychological, and culturally informed care is essential to accomplishing real justice and healing.

Family Involvement and Support

Family plays an important role in the rehabilitation and well-being of juveniles who have experienced trauma. Beyond the providing of financial resources, emotionally supportive and actively engaged families can increasingly influence a young person’s ability to recover and succeed. The research from previously above shows that children with strong family bonds are more likely to respond greatly to therapy interventions and show lower rate of relapse. However, many families face their own personal problems, including generational traumas, lack of access to resources, and socio-economic barriers that limit their ability to provide consistent support. When these challenges are not recognized or resolved, efforts to help the juvenile can be complicated. It is important, therefore, that systems working with juvenile youths adapt a trauma response approach that includes and supports the family. Programs that offer family therapy, parenting education, and thought-out opportunities for families to participate in the juveniles healing process have been shown to improve outcomes.

Solutions and Reforms

To move beyond financial support, juvenile justice programs must recognize and address trauma at every level. Providing trauma care ensures staff respond with rehabilitation rather than punishment. Community-based alternatives to incarceration like diversion programs and restorative justice keep youth connected to supportive environments. Recognizing the unequal impact on youth of color, reforms must include culturally good mental health care and fair treatment. Supporting families through counseling, education, and involvement in rehabilitation strategies creates a strong foundation for healing. Financial support alone is not enough; lasting change requires emotional, psychological, and structural support. Collaboration is key to creating coordinated trauma services. Only by centering trauma and equity can juvenile justice programs truly support youth in meaningful, long-term ways

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