



OJJDP FACT SHEET

Shay Bilchik, Administrator

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Mental Health Disorders and Substance Abuse Problems Among Juveniles

by Shay Bilchik

With more and more juveniles coming into the justice system, it is crucial that we deal not only with the specific behavior or circumstances that bring them to our attention, but also with their underlying, often long-term mental health and substance abuse problems. Although the prevalence of mental health and substance abuse disorders among youth in the juvenile justice system is largely unknown, recent research suggests that these problems are significantly greater for juvenile delinquents than for other youth. It has been estimated that each year, of the youth who come in contact with the juvenile justice system, 150,000 meet the diagnostic criteria for at least one mental disorder, 225,000 suffer from a diagnosable alcohol abuse or dependence disorder, and 95,000 may suffer from a diagnosable substance abuse or dependence disorder (Cocozza, 1992).

Research has also demonstrated that juvenile delinquents tend to have both mental health disorders and substance abuse problems, and a high percentage of them also have conduct disorders. Finally, research and experience demonstrate that the services available in the juvenile justice system to alleviate these problems are entirely inadequate.

Four key steps by government and private organizations can help remedy this situation. First, we must learn more. To obtain a clearer picture of the incidence and prevalence of mental health and substance abuse disorders among juveniles, we must support research and data collection. To this end, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) is contributing to a multiyear National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) study of substance use, antisocial behavior, and the long-term efficacy of stimulant medication and intensive behavioral and educational treatment for children with attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder. OJJDP funds will permit the study to add a focus on youth's delinquent behavior and contact with the juvenile justice system.

Second, if we are to effectively respond to the prevalence of mental health and substance abuse problems among juveniles in our justice system, we must carefully assess juveniles when they

first come in contact with the system. Quality assessments can determine whether young offenders represent a risk to the community and also can form the basis for effective treatment plans that will reduce the likelihood of reoffending by addressing the issues that put the youth at risk for delinquency.

OJJDP is striving to improve the assessment process by enhancing two current assessment centers in Orlando, FL, and Golden, CO, and supporting the planning of two centers in Fort Myers, FL, and Denver, CO. These sites are enhancing or planning community assessment centers that provide a 24-hour centralized point of intake and assessment for juveniles and facilitate more efficient delivery of services when youth first enter the system.

Third, to effectively rehabilitate juveniles, we must increase the number of quality treatment programs in the community and in juvenile institutions. This step requires a significant commitment of resources and cross-training to improve the ability of juvenile justice and mental health staff to deal with juvenile offenders who have mental health and substance abuse problems. It also requires a determination to maintain a therapeutic environment in the juvenile justice system. In support of this goal, OJJDP has transferred funds to the Center for Mental Health Services to strengthen the capacity of its 31 child mental health sites to serve youth in the juvenile justice system. In partnership with the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), OJJDP has also transferred funds to the National Institute of Corrections to support the training and technical assistance work of the GAINS Center. The Center helps court and juvenile justice leaders improve treatment and services for juvenile offenders with co-occurring disorders. To reach Native-American youth (including those in the juvenile justice system) who are seriously emotionally disturbed and/or substance abusers with the circles of care treatment approach, OJJDP is supplementing a SAMHSA program that will support six to eight sites with grants and training and technical assistance.

The fourth step focuses on juveniles who are at risk for delinquency rather than those already in the juvenile justice system.

OJJDP, in partnership with NIMH, is funding the Early Alliance project. This large-scale project in Columbia, SC, elementary schools is designed to promote coping and competence among youth and reduce their risk for conduct problems, aggression, substance abuse, delinquency, violence, and school failure. OJJDP is also partnering with SAMHSA and the Child Welfare League of America to strengthen the services provided to chemically involved youth and families and to produce a document for policymakers on practice and policies regarding child abuse and neglect concerns and substance abuse.

Each one of these steps is an important part of a comprehensive effort to effectively address the critical mental health needs and substance abuse problems facing so many of our youth. In order to maximize our efforts, however, we must work across disciplines through juvenile justice partnerships, with organizations serving children, families, and communities all working together. OJJDP is committed to establishing and strengthening these partnerships at the national level in an effort to pave the way for system reform at the State and local levels. Our children deserve no less than a full effort in this regard.

Resources

Juvenile Justice Clearinghouse
P.O. Box 6000
Rockville, MD 20849-6000
800-638-8736

National Institute of Mental Health
Public Inquiries Office
Parklawn Building, Room 7C-02
5600 Fishers Lane
Rockville, MD 20857
301-443-4513

Policy Research Associates
GAINS Center
262 Delaware Avenue
Delmar, NY 12054
518-439-7415

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration
Center for Mental Health Services
Child, Adolescent, and Family Branch
Parklawn Building, Room 18-49
5600 Fishers Lane
Rockville, MD 20857
301-443-1333

U.S. Department of Justice
Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention
Doug Dodge, Director, Special Emphasis Division
810 Seventh Street NW., Eighth Floor
Washington, DC 20531
202-307-5914

Reference

Cocozza, J., ed. 1992 (November). *Responding to the Mental Health Needs of Youth in the Juvenile Justice System*. Seattle, WA: The National Coalition for the Mentally Ill in the Criminal Justice System.

Shay Bilchik is Administrator of the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

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