

Chapin Hall Research Brief



Youth Trauma Experiences and the Path from Child Welfare to Juvenile Justice

This brief summarizes a study exploring the role of trauma, history of child welfare involvement, and other child, family, and community factors in the path of crossover from child welfare into the juvenile justice system.

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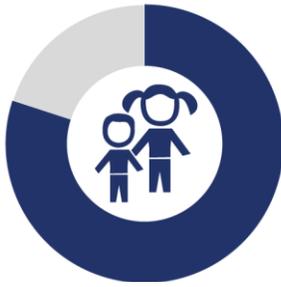
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Introduction

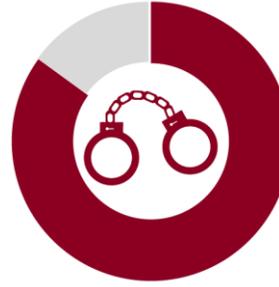
Children in the child welfare system are nearly four times more likely to have experienced four or more traumatic events than youth not involved in the child welfare systemⁱ. Children also frequently move between these systems. Prior research has looked at some determinants of this movement. Characteristics such as genderⁱⁱ, raceⁱⁱⁱ, and placement in substitute care^{iv} have been shown to have effects on youth moving from child welfare to the juvenile justice system (crossing over). Less is known about how traumatic experiences combine with child, family, and community factors to impact the likelihood of youth crossing over or experiencing dual involvement (being involved with both systems at the same time). Examining these relationships may help policymakers and service providers better identify and serve youth at risk of crossing over or becoming dually-involved.

This brief summarizes a study exploring the role of trauma, history of child welfare involvement, and other child, family, and community factors in the path of crossover from child welfare into the juvenile justice system.



Approximately
85% of youth
 involved in the child
 welfare system have been
 exposed to at least one
 traumatic event

(Source: Miller, Green, Fettes, & Aarons, 2011)



80% of youth
 involved with juvenile
 justice system have been
 exposed to at least one
 traumatic event

(Source: A study conducted in Cook County, IL .(Abram et al., 2004).
 Similarly, more than 75% of youth in the juvenile justice system have
 experienced traumatic victimization (Abram et al., 2004; Ford, Chapman,
 Connor, & Cruise, 2012)

Research Methods

We analyzed data from a sample of Chicago area youth born between 1996 and 2002 with child welfare system involvement and a Child and Adolescent Needs and Strengths (CANS) assessment on file. The CANS is a tool administered to young people who are placed in foster care. It helps clarify (among other things) the extent to which young people have experienced trauma. Because we are interested in trauma experiences, among children and youth who crossed over from child welfare to juvenile justice, we include in the study only those young people for whom we had CANS information. As a consequence, the youth in our sample are likely to have had one or more out-of-home foster care placements and an extensive child welfare history. We used administrative records (see Table 1) to identify if and when youth experience a juvenile justice system contact, specifically, any instance of arrest, detention, court involvement, probation, or juvenile corrections.

Youth with high numbers of
out-of-home placements
 and those who are older at the
 time of their first placement are
 at risk for crossover

Findings

The Chicago-area, child-welfare involved youth in our sample report substantial exposure to traumatic experiences as measured by the CANS assessment (see Figure 1). The proportions of child neglect (61%), physical abuse (40%), and sexual abuse (20%) are comparable to the instances of substantiated maltreatment identified by the child welfare system. Over 40 percent of youth report exposure to family violence. Almost one in five youth (17%) have been a witness to or victim of crime. Youth also report community violence (10%); medical trauma (8%); and school violence (4%).

Type	Characteristics
Child and Adolescent Needs and Strengths	Trauma exposure (Trauma); trauma symptoms; child strengths; life domain functioning; acculturation; behavioral/emotional needs; risk behaviors; caregiver needs & strengths
Child Welfare History	Total number of investigations; substantiated investigations (i.e., confirmed maltreatment) by type; number of out-of-home placements; age at first out-of-home placement
Juvenile Justice Involvement	Arrest; detention; court involvement; probation; corrections
Community Factors	Urban Hardship Index: unemployment; dependency; education; income level; crowded housing; poverty
Youth Characteristics	Birth year; age at child welfare entry; age at CANS assessment; race/ethnicity; gender

Figure 1. Juvenile justice contacts by age 18 and trauma quartile



Note: Trauma experiences total average score by quartile (scored 0 – 3). Average trauma score Quartile 1 (0-25%) = 0.32; Quartile 2 (26-50%) = 0.58; Quartile 3 (51-75%) = 0.76; Quartile 4 (76%-100%) = 1.12.

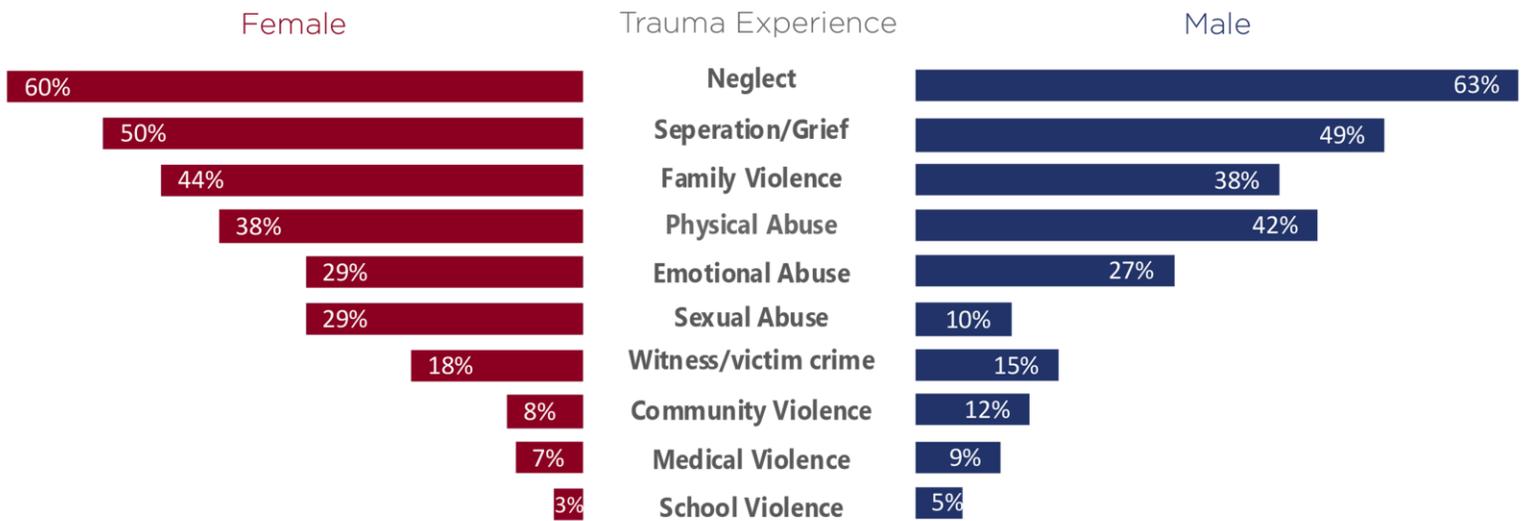
Does greater total trauma exposure relate to increased crossover into the juvenile justice system?

Youth with the least trauma exposure (Q1) have the lowest rates of arrest, detention, court, and probation but the pattern is not consistent as trauma exposure increases (Figure 1). We looked at the relationship between total trauma exposure and likelihood of moving from the child welfare to the juvenile justice system while controlling for child welfare history and additional child, family, and community factors. We found no evidence that greater total trauma exposure is related to an increased probability of crossover into the juvenile justice system.

What is the relationship between crossover and specific patterns of trauma and other factors?

Our results suggest that specific patterns of trauma experiences might play a role in crossover. We found that exposure to violence in the community and at school is related to increased probability of some types of juvenile justice involvement. Risk behaviors, as measured by the CANS, are closely associated with increased risk of detention, court filing, probation, and juvenile corrections. In particular, a high score on the CANS delinquency risk behavior item is associated with all types of system crossover. Having a high number of out-of-home placements is another key factor associated with juvenile justice contact. We found no evidence that community factors relate to likelihood that youth will move from the child welfare to the juvenile justice system.

Figure 2 CANS Trauma experiences, moderate to severe trauma exposure by type and by gender



Do specific patterns of trauma and rates of crossover vary between male and female youth?

As shown in Figure 1, males and females in the study cohort experience similar levels of trauma exposure, although the type of trauma differs. Girls experience increased rates of sexual abuse and boys experience increased rates of exposure to violence outside the home. Males have significantly higher levels of crossover into the juvenile justice system. For males, several dimensions of child welfare history and risk behaviors relate to the likelihood of crossover. For females, the number of out-of-home placements, trauma specific to exposure to community violence, and having behavioral or emotional needs relate to crossover.

Limitations

Study results should be interpreted in light of several limitations. This study utilizes administrative data that may not contain all relevant youth activities or circumstances. In addition, our sample only includes young people with one or more out-of-home foster care placements and often extensive child welfare histories. Our results are specific to this unique population and are not generalizable to the broader child welfare population. While these limitations present some challenges to the study results, the benefits of the data far outweigh the limitations.

Exposure to violence
in the community and at school increases the risk for crossover juvenile justice involvement.

Discussion

Results indicate that total trauma exposure is not related to likelihood of crossover once youth characteristics, child welfare history, and risks and strengths are also considered. This suggests that trauma experiences are only one piece of a complicated puzzle contributing to crossover from the child welfare to the juvenile justice system. Results do point to exposure to violence in the community and at school as increasing the risk for crossover juvenile justice involvement. This suggests that inquiring about youth's exposure to community and school violence could be a potential strategy for identifying youth at high risk for crossover. Once identified, this group could be included in interventions designed to help youth address trauma from those experiences.

Youth with high numbers of out-of-home placements and those who are older at the time of their first placement also appear to be at particular risk for crossover. Recognizing placement instability as a key risk factor for crossover is an important finding. One factor in placement disruption may be that these placements are ill-equipped to handle youth dealing with trauma. This finding emphasizes the importance of targeting child welfare resources to ensure placement stability. One possible strategy to prevent the initial foster care placement for older youth is increasing resources for utilization of intensive home-based wraparound services.

These findings highlight the importance of screening for trauma within each system (child welfare and juvenile justice) and across touchpoints (e.g., detention, court, probation, corrections). Having tools that screen for different types of trauma may be particularly important. There is also a need to ensure that relevant information about youth, such as trauma concerns or juvenile justice contacts, is available to agency staff as youth move across placements, programs, and agencies. Having this information may enable staff to better serve youth at increased risk for crossover. It is also important for both systems to offer a diverse array of evidence-based, trauma-informed interventions so that, once identified, youth needs can be effectively addressed.

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Acknowledgement and Disclaimer

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