

## Children With Emotional Disorders In The Juvenile Justice System

Each year over one million children come into contact in some way with the juvenile justice system. Over 100,000 of these youth are detained in a correctional facility.

Studies have consistently found the rate of mental disorders to be higher among the juvenile justice population than among youths in the general population. In fact, federal studies suggest that as many as 60 percent of incarcerated youth have a mental health disorder and 20 percent have a severe disorder. As many as half have substance abuse problems.<sup>1</sup>

### **What disorders are most common?**

Along with substance abuse, the most common disorders among youth in the justice system are conduct disorder, depression, attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder, learning disabilities, post traumatic stress disorder, and developmental disabilities.<sup>2</sup> Many youth in the justice system have co-existing disorders, which compounds the challenges in diagnosing and treating these youth.

### **Why are children with emotional disorders in the justice system?**

While some of these children have committed serious crimes, many of them got in trouble because local communities failed to provide services to address their emotional and behavioral problems. These children are disproportionately poor and children of color. Along with their underlying mental disorder, many have histories of other problems that have not been addressed, including: physical and/or sexual abuse; parental drug or alcohol use; poor school performance or truancy; family discord, and learning disabilities.

### **What can be done to help children with emotional disorders in the justice system?**

Mental health services can both prevent children from committing delinquent offenses and from re-offending. These services include prevention, early identification and intervention, assessment, outpatient treatment, home-based services, wrap-around services, family support groups, day treatment, residential treatment, crisis services and inpatient hospitalization. These services are most effective when integrated at the local level with other services provided by schools, child welfare agencies, and community organizations. In addition, intensive work with families at the early stages of their child's problems can strengthen the families' ability to care for their children at home.

Children whose offenses are minor or non-violent should, whenever possible, be diverted away from incarceration and towards treatment, services and supervision in their local community. Because it is not possible to divert all children with emotional disorders, the juvenile justice system and the mental health system should work together to develop programs and services within juvenile systems for these children. These services should be treatment-oriented, appropriate for the child's age, gender and culture, individualized, and family-focused.

---

<sup>1</sup> Coccozza, J.J. (ed.) *Responding to Youth With Mental Disorders in the Juvenile Justice System*. Seattle, WA, The National Coalition for the Mentally Ill in the Criminal Justice System, 1992.

<sup>2</sup> Garfinkel, Lili F., *Unique Challenges, Hopeful Responses: A Handbook for Professionals Working with Youth With Disabilities in the Juvenile Justice System*, PACER Center, 1997.