

## Prevalence

Historically, there has not been a significant amount of attention paid to the mental health needs of youth involved with the juvenile justice system. It has only been within the last decade that interest and concern for this population has grown. Despite the growing concern, there remains a lack adequate research on the nature and prevalence of mental disorder among youth in the juvenile justice system.

The 1992 release of the research monograph, *Responding to the Mental Health Needs of Youth in the Juvenile Justice System* (Cocozza, 1992) represented one of the first attempts to systematically review the existing research base on a variety of issues pertaining to youth with mental health needs in the juvenile justice system. This comprehensive review found the mental health prevalence research conducted to date to be scarce and methodologically flawed, citing such concerns as the inconsistent definitions and measurements of mental illness; the use of biased, nonrandom samples; reliance on retrospective case report data; and the use of nonstandardized measurement instruments.

Since the release of the 1992 monograph, the research base on the prevalence of mental health disorder among the juvenile justice population has grown. While much remains to be done and certainly further research is warranted, a number of new studies have been undertaken or are underway that show significant promise in terms of expanding our knowledge base about mental health and juvenile justice. These new studies allow us to draw some general conclusions about mental health prevalence among youth in the juvenile justice system:

- Youth in the juvenile justice system experience substantially higher rates of mental disorder than youth in the general population. It is estimated that anywhere from 70% to 100% of youth in the juvenile justice system are believed to have a diagnosable mental health disorder (Teplin et al, 2002; Otto et al., 1992; Virginia Policy Design Team, 1994; Wierson, Forehand and Frame, 1992).
- It is safe to estimate that approximately one out of every five youth in the juvenile justice system has a serious mental health disorder. With the prevalence rate of serious emotion disturbance (SED) for youth in the general population estimated to be between 9 to 13 percent, and with the prevalence rate of disorders for youth in the juvenile justice system to be at least twice as high (Otto et. al, 1992), it is reasonable to estimate that the prevalence rate of serious mental health disorders among youth in the juvenile justice system to be at least 20% (Cocozza and Skowrya, 2000).
- Many of the youth in the juvenile justice system with mental illness also experience a co-occurring substance use disorder. Although the research based on this issue is still developing, Greenbaum, Foster-Johnson and Petrilla (1996) found that “approximately half of all adolescents receiving mental health services” in the general population are reported as having a dual diagnosis. A more recent study of juvenile detainees in Cook County, Illinois found that nearly

30% of females and more than 20% of males with substance use disorders had major mental health disorders (Abram et al, 2003).

While attention to the mental health needs of youth in the juvenile justice system has increased, so has the availability of information and research to better understand these needs. Despite the continued limitations of even the more recent data (e.g. studies focusing exclusively on youth at one point of contact within the juvenile justice system; small sample sizes; and the use of different measures across studies making comparisons difficult), our collective understanding of mental health and juvenile justice has grown. This chapter of the Resource Kit is designed to provide an overview of this current knowledge base- the most recent research and information released within the last decade examining mental health prevalence among youth involved with the juvenile justice system.

## **References**

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