

## **Special Issues**

As a result of our developing research and knowledge base, we are now beginning to understand the diversity of the juvenile justice population, as well as the need to develop responses that effectively and compassionately take these differences into account. The challenge of providing effective mental health treatment to youth in the juvenile justice system is underscored when one considers the complex diagnostic and treatment issues surrounding the provision of mental health services to specific populations of youth, such as youth of color; adolescent girls; lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth; and youth with co-occurring mental health and substance use disorders.

While further research is necessary to understand the needs associated with these individual groups of youth, we are now much more cognizant of the diversity of the juvenile justice population than we were a decade ago. The current challenge for the juvenile justice and mental health systems is to develop service strategies that recognize and respond to these unique differences. Provided below is a brief introduction to the key issues associated with four subgroups of youth in the juvenile justice system.

### **(1) Youth of Color**

Youth of color are overrepresented in the juvenile justice system, when compared to their representation in the general youth population. African American and, increasingly Hispanic/Latino youth, are not only overrepresented in the juvenile justice system but they are also disproportionately represented in the more restrictive levels of care—locked training facilities, residential treatment centers, and, increasingly, waiver into adult correctional facilities (Isaacs, in press). Despite significant advances in the development of evidence-based treatments for many child and adolescent mental health disorders, youth of color with mental health problems are likely to be misdiagnosed, undiagnosed, and/or untreated. In addition, the juvenile justice and mental health systems often lack the personnel, policies, programs or resources needed to intervene effectively and in culturally competent ways (Isaacs, in press).

### **(2) Youth with Co-Occurring Mental Health and Substance Use Disorders**

Many of the youth with mental health disorders in the juvenile justice system are also experiencing some co-occurring substance use disorder. The term co-occurring disorder describes two independent medical conditions that occur at the same time. Within the mental health and substance abuse systems, the term typically describes the simultaneous presence of a major mental health disorder and a substance use disorder (GAINS Cross-Training Curriculum, 2000). While this research base is still developing, it is estimated that the rates of co-occurring disorders among the juvenile justice population may be as high as 50-80% (Milin et al., 1991; Otto et al., 1992). 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).

### **(3) Girls**

There are large numbers of girls involved with the juvenile justice system and that number has increased substantially over the last decade. Available research suggests that many of these girls, over 70%, have a diagnosable mental health disorder (Teplin, 2002), often associated with histories of sexual or physical abuse and neglect. Further, there is evidence that there are gender differences in prevalence rates and types of disorders, with girls experiencing higher rates of depression; anxiety disorders, including post-traumatic stress disorder; somatization disorders; and borderline personality disorders than boys (Veysey, 2003). Gender-specific and trauma-informed programming and treatment are often not available within juvenile justice settings to address the complex set of needs that many delinquent girls present.

### **(4) Sexual Minority Youth**

Research indicates that lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth may comprise between four and ten percent of the total juvenile justice population. These percentages, however, may be grossly understated, due to the lack of research on this topic and the fact that many of these youth may be reluctant to admit to their sexual or gender orientation. Once in the juvenile justice system, there are few services available to meet their needs and many of the staff who are assigned to work with these youth do not understand the issues they are facing. (Feinstein et al, 2001). Moreover, sexual minority youth experience high rates of mental health problems, are two to three times more likely to attempt suicide compared with other youth, and comprise 30 percent of all successful suicides in the United States (Feinstein et al, 2001).

The information included in this chapter of the Resource Kit is organized around these four groups of youth involved with the juvenile justice system. Relevant background information, current research and other resources are included for each identified group of youth.

## **References**

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