Mental Health

Up to **90%** of youth in the juvenile justice system report exposure to a traumatic event

Detained youth are **3x** more likely to commit suicide than their peers

Massachusetts Alliance of Juvenile Court Clinics (MAJCC)
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Of the 2 million children and youth that come into contact with the juvenile justice system each year, 65-70% meet the criteria for a mental health disorder, compared to 20% of the general adolescent population. Youth in the juvenile justice system often suffer from co-occurring disorders that were overlooked, misdiagnosed, or inadequately addressed.[1] Youth with unmet mental health needs are at greater risk of contact with the juvenile justice system. Furthermore, about 27% of detained youth have a severe mental disorder that needs immediate attention, leaving them particularly vulnerable to the adverse consequences of confinement.[2] 77% of clients referred to Middlesex County's Juvenile Court Clinic in 2015 had a history of being diagnosed with at least one mental disorder.[3]

Trauma

Up to 90% of youth in the juvenile justice system report exposure to a traumatic event, leaving them at very high risk for mental health disorders. Approximately 30% of justice-involved youth meet criteria for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Justice-involved youth also report high rates of co-occurring trauma, with the majority of these experiences taking place during the first 5 years of life. Exposure to multiple trauma types triples the risk for PTSD.[4] Child maltreatment, violence, and traumatic loss put youth at higher risk for delinquent or criminal involvement, exhibiting or becoming a victim to violence later in life, mood disorders, substance abuse, and poor educational performance. Sexual trauma is another major risk factor for involvement in the juvenile justice system for female youth, especially female youth of color.[5] Trauma impacts brain development in children, affecting regulation of emotion, memory, and behavior.[6]

Suicide and Self-Harming Behavior

Suicide is the third leading cause of death among youth ages 15-24.[7] Over 50% of detained youth report suicidal thoughts, one-third have a history of suicidal behavior, and detained youth complete suicide at a rate 3 times greater than the general adolescent population.[8] Studies also find that approximately 15% of justice-involved youth engage in self-injury such as cutting or disordered eating. Most justice-involved youth who self-harm or attempt suicide have a diagnosable mental disorder, substance use disorder, or suffer from childhood trauma.[9]

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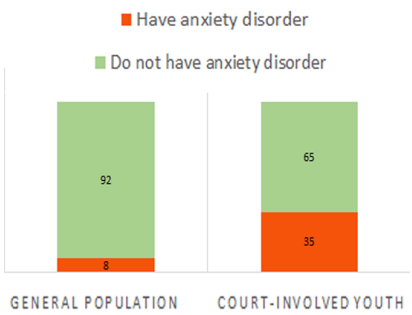
(Please see reverse side for more references)

Mental Health

Youth with mood disorders are more likely to exhibit **anger, irritability, and hostility**

General Population vs. Court-Involved Youth



Youth with ADD or ADHD are **twice as likely** to commit a crime

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Mood Disorders

Mood disorders, including depression, have high prevalence rates in youth in the juvenile justice system, with females at higher risk. Some studies show depression rates to be as high as 50%.[15] Youth with mood disorders are more likely to exhibit anger, irritability, and hostility, increasing the chance of engaging in physically aggressive altercations.[10] Youth with depression exhibit lower self-efficacy in regulating emotions and impulses, increasing the likelihood of delinquent behavior, suicidal behavior, and substance abuse.[11] The low levels of social support networks among court-involved youth heighten their vulnerability to the negative impacts of stress, increasing the risk for mood disorders and justice system involvement.[12]

Anxiety Disorders

Anxiety disorders such as Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, Panic Disorder, and Social Anxiety Disorder have become more of a concern in recent years, with rates markedly greater than those observed in the general population, notably at first contact with the juvenile justice system.[13] Anxiety disorders affect about 35% of all youth in the juvenile justice system, and over half of female youth in the system, compared to about 8% of the general adolescent population. It is likely that interaction with the justice system itself leads to elevated rates of anxiety disorders. Moreover, research suggests that youth with anxiety disorders are more likely to engage in behaviors that mitigate their symptoms without consideration of repercussions.[14] PTSD is a debilitating anxiety disorder that frequently leads to other psychiatric diagnoses and puts youth at risk for responding to perceived threats aggressively and impulsively.[15]

Attention Deficit Disorder /Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADD/ADHD)

ADD and ADHD are the most commonly diagnosed mental disorders among youth in the juvenile justice system. 30%-50% of court-involved youth meet criteria for ADD/ADHD, compared to about 3-5% of school-age youth in the general population.[16] Untreated, these disorders are associated with academic underachievement, relational difficulties, increased rates of delinquency, and higher risk for other mental health disorders. Since youth are still in the process of brain development, the disorganization and poor impulse control that often characterize ADD and ADHD increase the chance that youth with these disorders will engage in risk-taking behavior. Studies have shown that youth with ADD/ADHD are twice as likely to commit a crime, and are at greater risk for offending at a younger age, as well as reoffending, compared to youth without these disorders.[17]

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