

## Complex Trauma:

### In Juvenile Justice System-Involved Youth



*Elizabeth is a 17-year-old Hispanic female whose father was murdered by a drug dealer when she was three years old. After his death, she, her mother, stepfather, and two older sisters lived together in an economically disadvantaged neighborhood. Her stepfather, who left when she turned 12, physically and verbally abused Elizabeth and her other family members. Elizabeth's mother was also verbally and physically abusive toward her.*

*Elizabeth also remembers being bullied in elementary school. In addition to the direct maltreatment she experienced, she has known several female family members and friends – including her sister and her best friend from preschool – who were sexually assaulted.*

*Elizabeth first began affiliating with gangs when she was 12 years old and considered them her “real family.” She started smoking marijuana heavily after joining the gang and used multiple other substances to get high. At age 13, she assaulted another teen and received 18 months of house arrest. She reports that she “blacked out” during this incident and doesn’t remember much of it. She later discovered that she had broken the youth’s nose and arm. Despite her lack of recall about that assault, however, she reports that she is haunted by the image of seeing someone shot in the head and watching him die. At the age of 16, she was convicted of drug- and weapons-related offenses and was sentenced to a youth detention center for a year. At the time, she reported that beating people up was part of her gang’s expectations for belonging.*

As Elizabeth’s story illustrates, youth who come to the attention of law enforcement and become involved in the juvenile justice system are often experiencing the after-effects of years of exposure to complex interpersonal trauma. These youth have faced repeated threats to their lives or the lives of people closest to them. Losing key people in their lives, and experiencing betrayals of trust and abandonment from caregivers, compound the violations of the basic social contract that every youth should have an equal opportunity to have a successful life as a valued member of society.

These survival threats and painful emotional (and often also physical) injuries are a part of daily life and second nature for too many youth who become involved with law enforcement and juvenile justice. They also are forms of complex trauma that can have lifelong adverse effects.

More than two-thirds of youth involved with law enforcement or juvenile justice have complex histories of interpersonal trauma, including exposure to neglect, emotional, physical, and sexual abuse, family and community violence, traumatic losses, and disrupted relationships with primary caregivers (Ford, et al., 2013). Many also come from families in which caregivers and siblings are coping with other adversities such as substance abuse, mental health problems, unemployment, or discrimination based on race, ethnicity, sexual identity, or disability, legal problems, or incarceration). Youth from ethnic and racial minorities and those from low-income backgrounds are disproportionately involved in the juvenile justice system and subject to these additional adversities.

## WHAT IS COMPLEX TRAUMA?

*The term complex trauma describes both children's exposure to multiple traumatic events, often of an invasive, interpersonal nature, and the wide-ranging, long-term impact of this exposure. These events are severe and pervasive, such as abuse or profound neglect. They usually begin early in life and can disrupt many aspects of the child's development, including the formation of a self. Since these adversities frequently occur in the context of the child's relationship with a caregiver, they can interfere with the child's ability to form a secure attachment bond. Many aspects of a child's healthy physical and mental development rely on this primary source of safety and stability.*

## PATHWAYS FROM COMPLEX TRAUMA TO INVOLVEMENT IN JUVENILE JUSTICE AND RECIDIVISM

The pathways from complex trauma exposure to involvement in juvenile justice and recidivism are correspondingly complex and variable. **One common denominator is the adoption of an unstated code of behavior.** This "survival code" differs from the established rules of the majority society, and is a direct consequence of traumatic stress on emotional, physiological, and behavioral factors which place youth at increased risk of committing offenses. The experience of complex trauma violates the social contract that lies at the heart of societal laws and structures: the unspoken contract that says that good deeds and behavior are rewarded, that perpetrating harm should and will be punished, and that maintaining order is mutually beneficial. For youth who have experienced repeated violence, violation, exploitation, rejection, and abandonment in their homes, schools, and communities, safety and justice seem impossible to obtain. As a result, the rubric of survival ("What do I have to do to survive?") is likely to trump legality ("Is this behavior appropriate within the laws of my community and society?").

**A second common denominator for youth with complex trauma histories who are involved with law enforcement or juvenile justice is difficulty in effectively managing emotions,** physical reactions, impulses, attention, consequential thinking (i.e., problem-solving and decision-making based on an awareness of and accurate

evaluation of consequences), and involvement in interpersonal relationships (i.e., ranging from extreme isolation to enmeshment in dangerous or exploitive relationships). These are the building blocks for self-regulation, the ability to draw on one's own inner strengths and genuinely supportive relationships in order to channel motivation, manage distress, and think effectively. The development in childhood of these self-regulation capacities is severely undermined by complex trauma.

As a result, these youth often have problems in school, family relationships, and with substance abuse, sexualized behaviors, risky or reckless behavior, delinquency, and running away. On the surface, these behaviors may appear to be motivated by disregard for their own or others' safety and well-being and the law, but actually they are attempts to cope with or prevent further traumatization. Seen from the perspective of these youths' internal realities, their excessive suspiciousness, hostility, defiance, and disconnection from relationships with others may be necessary adaptations in order to prevent further vulnerability, betrayal, and victimization.

## COMPLEX TRAUMA AND GIRLS IN THE JUSTICE SYSTEM

*Girls now account for approximately 30 percent of the estimated 2.11 million juvenile arrests made each year. On any given day, more than 7,800 girls reside in detention or juvenile corrections facilities in the US (Kerig & Ford, 2014). Girls' arrest rates for violent offenses—including physical assault, sexual assault, and homicide—have increased 78 percent while declining 6 percent for boys. Girls in the justice system also report higher levels of exposure to traumatic experiences, interpersonal victimization (particularly forms of abuse that occur in the context of close personal relationships such as family violence and sexual assault), and mental health problems, including PTSD, than their male peers. Among traumatized girls, researchers have found heightened stress-reactivity, developmental lags, and adverse effects of traumatic maltreatment. These effects increase the risk for “intra- and inter-relational chaos” and lead to volatile and conflictual relationships, as well as involvement with antisocial romantic partners. These relationship choices, in turn, increase the risk not only of justice-involvement but of subsequent intimate partner violence and re-victimization (Chamberlain & Leve, 2004). Experiences of trauma, maltreatment, and victimization play a role in placing girls on the pathway toward delinquency, re-traumatization, and chronic exposure to complex trauma. Other researchers observe that many girls in the justice system have endured their most traumatic experiences in the context of close personal relationships, and that involvement in those relationships also increases the risk of their perpetrating violence themselves. Fostering positive relationships may play a significant role in helping girls both to heal from trauma and avoid furthering a course leading to more involvement with the juvenile justice system.*

### HOW YOUTH IN THE JUVENILE JUSTICE SYSTEM ARE AFFECTED BY COMPLEX TRAUMA

Survival-oriented coping, although necessary for self-protection when complex trauma is occurring (or could re-occur, even during periods of apparent safety), may compromise the functioning of three key systems in the brain and body:

- The **reward/motivation system** that is essential for attention, learning, initiating and completing tasks, and social and moral judgment;
- The **distress tolerance system** that is crucial to coping with frustration, boredom, unhappiness, worry, sadness, fear, guilt, shame, and depression; and
- The **executive system** that is necessary for proactive problem-solving, sustained and focused attention, setting goals and making and carrying out plans to achieve them, and recognizing and utilizing emotions as a guide to personal decisions and relationships.



Thus, youth with complex trauma histories tend to have extremely high “survival IQs,” but due to operating in survival mode they often experience serious difficulties in several areas:

- stopping to think before reacting
- setting and achieving goals that involve positive outcomes
- handling intense feelings of frustration/anger without resorting to aggression
- handling intense feelings of disappointment/hopelessness without becoming isolative, reckless, self-harming, or suicidal
- using alcohol and drugs to cope with frustration, boredom, and hopelessness
- developing and maintaining relationships based on mutual trust and well-being
- following social and legal rules and expectations
- recognizing their own self-worth and positive accomplishments

Often youth who have had to survive complex trauma and have become involved in the juvenile justice system appear defiant, unmotivated, and “incorrigible” as a result of attempting to deny and conceal distress, disillusionment, and self-blame through a façade of indifference or aggression. In order to gain a sense of personal control, relief from distress, social inclusion, and self-esteem, they may turn to self-medication, avoidance and isolation, or choose peer relationships based on detachment from or rejection of mainstream values, norms, and cultural practices.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Although complex trauma leads youth to be suspicious or even defiant toward adults who offer help, these youth are very resilient and can be reached by adults who are willing to support them patiently – not by endorsing actions that are illegal, dangerous, or harmful, but by aligning with these youths’ core goals, values, and personal strengths, and offering guidance that empowers rather than judges them.

### For Judges and Juvenile Justice Program Administrators

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) provides practical guidance for leaders such as judges and administrators who are seeking to implement a trauma-informed approach in their systems.

- Ensure that all staff as well as all youth and families have the knowledge, tools and resources needed in order to **realize** the impact of trauma in youths’ daily lives.
- **Recognize** the role that trauma-related reactions and survival coping play in youths’ behavioral, emotional, and legal problems.
- **Respond** in a manner that enhances the safety of the youth as well as the community and the youth’s ability to achieve her/his full potential through developing a healthy lifestyle, skills, and relationships. And,
- Prevent **re-traumatization** or the triggering of trauma-related memories.

Adding to SAMHSA's "4 Rs," as this guidance is known, the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) has identified eight essential elements of trauma-informed practice to support youth in the juvenile justice system who have been complexly traumatized. These are:

- 1 Ensure the physical and psychological safety of all youth, family members, and staff through the development of trauma-informed policies and procedures.
- 2 Identify youth who have experienced complex trauma through carefully timed screening.
- 3 Offer clinical assessment and trauma-focused intervention for complexly traumatized youth who have been identified as impaired in the screening process.
- 4 Provide trauma-informed programming and staff education on complex trauma for staff across all components of the juvenile justice system.
- 5 Recognize and respond to the adverse effects of secondary traumatic stress in the workplace in order to support workforce safety, effectiveness, and resilience.
- 6 Engage youth and their families as partners in all juvenile justice programming and therapeutic services.
- 7 Through cross-system collaboration, ensure the provision of continuous integrated services to justice-involved youth who have experienced complex trauma.
- 8 Review practices and policies to ensure that they address the diverse and unique needs of all groups of youth and do not result in disparities related to race, ethnicity, gender, gender-identity, sexual orientation, age, intellectual and developmental level, or socioeconomic background.

Other steps the juvenile justice system can take to help youth recover from complex trauma while pursuing the mission of ensuring public safety have been outlined in the [Report of the Attorney General's National Task Force on Children Exposed to Violence](#) and include:

- Limit laws and policies that have unintended negative consequences for youth with complex trauma (e.g., seclusion, restraints, shackling, pepper spray, and other potentially traumatizing sanctions, crisis interventions, and behavioral management strategies).
- Foster the social and emotional development of youth as a co-equal goal to preserving public safety. This is because public safety depends upon having youth who are able to develop into productive and responsible citizens.
- Provide services that increase the safety of youth who are being traumatized by abuse, sexual exploitation/trafficking, and stigma due to their racial/ethnic background, gender or sexual identity, or disabilities.

## For Parents, Family Members, and Adults Who Supervise Youth

- Take time to build trust with youth with complex trauma. Each has a personal story to share with only a few people who have earned his or her trust. Knowing the youth's story is the crucial first step to helping that youth build a good life.
- It takes a community: everyone in the youth's family and other supportive relationships must join together in order to heal their lives and make the community safe and healing.
- Strive to make every interaction with youth an honest and respectful dialogue by setting a model for how everyone—not just the youth—can and must “walk the walk” by taking responsibility for their emotions and actions and striving to achieve social justice.
- Be open to alternative ways of understanding the youths' motivations that highlight their core values, goals, and competencies instead of stigmatizing them as “incorrigible,” “unmotivated,” or “delinquent.”
- When conflict or disagreements occur, remember that it is developmentally appropriate for adolescents to be on an emotional rollercoaster and to assert their independence by debating everything others say. When adults are able to model being emotionally regulated and respectful this shows the adolescent that it's possible to work out disagreements without anyone being disrespected or being forced to be the “loser.”
- Remember there is no “one size fits all” formula that can be applied to all complexly traumatized youth—each youth is an individual who needs to be known and understood as the person that she/he is capable of being, rather than being treated as “just another bad kid” or “just another victim.”



## SOURCES

- Chamberlain, P., & Leve, L. D. (2004). Female juvenile offenders: Defining an early-onset pathway for delinquency. *Journal of Child & Family Studies*, 13, 439-452.
- Cook, A., Spinazzola, J., Ford, J., Lanktree, C., Blaustein, M., Cloitre, M., & van der Kolk, B. (2005). Complex trauma in children and adolescents. *Psychiatric Annals*, 35, 390-398.
- Ford, J. D., & Blaustein, M. (2012). Systemic self-regulation: A framework for trauma-informed services in residential juvenile justice programs. *Journal of Family Violence*, 28, 655-677.
- Ford, J. D., Chapman, J., Mack, M., & Pearson, G. (2006). Pathway from traumatic child victimization to delinquency: Implications for juvenile and permanency court proceedings and decisions. *Juvenile and Family Court Journal*, 57(1), 13-26.
- Ford, J. D., Chapman, J. C., Connor, D. F., & Cruise, K. C. (2012). Complex trauma and aggression in secure juvenile justice settings. *Criminal Justice & Behavior*, 39(5), 695-724.
- Ford, J. D., Grasso, D. J., Hawke, J., & Chapman, J. F. (2013). Poly-victimization among juvenile justice-involved youths. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 37, 788-800. doi: 10.1016/j.chiabu.2013.01.005
- Kerig, P. K., & Ford, J. D. (2015). *Trauma among girls in the juvenile justice system*. [http://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/assets/pdfs/trauma\\_among\\_girls\\_in\\_the\\_ji\\_system\\_2014.pdf](http://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/assets/pdfs/trauma_among_girls_in_the_ji_system_2014.pdf)

---

**Recommended Citation:** Complex Trauma Treatment Network of the National Child Traumatic Stress Network. (2016). *Complex trauma: In juvenile justice-system involved youth*. Los Angeles, CA, & Durham, NC: National Center for Child Traumatic Stress.

**A Special Thanks to:** Julian Ford, PhD, Rocío Chang, PsyD at the University of Connecticut & Rachel Liebman, PhD, Joseph Spinazzola, PhD at The Trauma Center at Justice Resource Institute.