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# Trauma-Informed Juvenile Justice Roundtable: Current Issues and New Directions in Creating Trauma-Informed Juvenile Justice Systems

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## Background

Creating trauma-informed service systems has been an integral focus of the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) since its inception in 2001. Consequently, a primary objective of the Service Systems Program at the National Center for Child Traumatic Stress (NCCTS) has been to educate stakeholders and provide skills-based training on how to become a trauma-informed service system. The juvenile justice system, specifically, has been an essential service system to target in light of the strikingly high prevalence of trauma exposure and traumatic stress among justice-involved youth.

Exciting advances in research, practice, and policy have occurred in the past decade that have elevated the importance of this work. One can no longer question whether youth in the juvenile justice system are experiencing trauma, due to rigorous replication studies on the prevalence rates of trauma and traumatic stress among justice-involved youth across the country. These findings have provided the impetus for juvenile courts, detention facilities, and other stakeholders to implement trauma-informed screening, assessments, and treatments in their settings. Due to these key research findings and the initiative of early adopters, policymakers are also now advocating for trauma-informed care within juvenile justice systems. This is best evidenced by the Report of the Attorney General's Task Force on Children Exposed to Violence, which included a section on improving the juvenile justice system, with key recommendations that support trauma-informed practices (see [Report of the Attorney General's Task Force on Children Exposed to Violence](#), 2012).

These advances are encouraging; however, there is more work to be done. An essential step in creating trauma-informed juvenile justice systems is to further understand the key elements of a trauma-informed juvenile justice system and to identify specific practice examples that speak to these elements. The NCCTS took this step by convening the Trauma-Informed Juvenile Justice Roundtable, which included trauma experts and key stakeholders, as well as clinicians, supervisors, and juvenile justice staff that provide services to youth in juvenile justice systems across the country.

## The Juvenile Justice Roundtable

The Juvenile Justice Roundtable was a two-day meeting exploring current issues and new directions in creating trauma-informed juvenile justice systems. Forty participants representing a rich array of backgrounds and expertise attended this meeting, including NCTSN members and affiliates, front-line juvenile justice staff, system administrators, mental health clinicians and supervisors, and partners from the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges (NCJFCJ) and the Center for Juvenile Justice Reform (CJJR). Additionally, five national experts on key issues in juvenile justice were invited in

order to advance our discussion of the key elements of a trauma-informed juvenile justice system.

Each expert addressed a specific element of a trauma-informed juvenile justice system; these included: disproportionate minority contact, environment of care, trauma-informed assessment and interventions, cross-system collaboration, and family partnerships. These elements are discussed in depth in the collection of briefs that accompanies this report. Two young adults who had been involved in the juvenile justice system as youth were also present. These presenters highlighted their experiences with childhood trauma and the juvenile justice system, and what types of practices and people were both harmful and helpful during their journey.

Throughout the meeting participants worked in small groups to discuss the important aspects of a trauma-informed juvenile justice system and the current challenges of this work. They evaluated the current state of the field in terms of resources, practices, and interventions, and identified gaps in the existing knowledge and resource base. Organizational trauma, the environment of care for staff, and the need to change the underlying correctional culture were also explored.

## Current Issues and Essential Elements

A primary issue in this work is furthering our understanding of what a trauma-informed juvenile justice system entails. In framing this discussion, we utilized the definition of a trauma-informed child and family serving system that was developed by the NCTSN Trauma-Informed Service Systems Working Group. This definition includes the following elements:

A service system with a trauma-informed perspective is one in which programs, agencies, and service providers: (1) routinely screen for trauma exposure and related symptoms; (2) use culturally appropriate evidence-based assessment and treatment for traumatic stress and associated mental health symptoms; (3) make resources available to children, families, and providers on trauma exposure, its impact, and treatment; (4) engage in efforts to strengthen the resilience and protective factors of children and families impacted by and vulnerable to trauma; (5) address parent and caregiver trauma and its impact on the family system; (6) emphasize continuity of care and collaboration across child-service systems; and (7) maintain an environment of care for staff that addresses, minimizes, and treats secondary traumatic stress, and that increases staff resilience. ([The National Child Traumatic Stress Network](#))

The goal of the Roundtable was to use this definition as the basis for identifying the essential elements of a trauma-informed juvenile justice system and the practices that result in implementation of these elements. Although our discussion was not exhaustive in highlighting all potential elements of a trauma-informed juvenile justice system, the following elements emerged as important starting points and are briefly discussed below and in the briefs that accompany this report:

- Utilize trauma screening and assessment and evidence-based trauma treatments designed for justice settings
- Partner with families to reduce the potential traumatic experience of justice involvement
- Collaborate across systems to enhance continuity of care
- Create a trauma-responsive environment of care
- Reduce disproportionate minority contact and address disparate treatment of minority youth

Trauma-informed screening and assessment and evidence-based trauma treatments are essential to a trauma-informed juvenile justice system. In *Trauma-Informed Assessment and Intervention*, Patricia Kerig, Professor at the University of Utah, discusses how these practices play an integral role in supporting traumatized youth as well as the challenges to implementing and sustaining these practices. She also highlights practice examples for how trauma-informed screening and assessment can be integrated into a justice setting.

Partnering with families is essential for children's well-being and an important part of a trauma-informed juvenile justice system. Caregivers and families need to be supported in order to support their children, and this includes considering the effect of caregiver trauma on parenting practices and ways of making justice involvement less trauma-inducing for caregivers and families. In *The Role of Family Engagement in Creating Trauma-Informed Juvenile Justice Systems*, Liane Rozzell, founder of Families and Allies of Virginia Youth, provides an eloquent discussion of the importance of partnering with families and ways in which to do so. For instance, she emphasizes that justice settings expand their outreach to supportive caregivers by

broadening their definition of family to include non-traditional caregivers and adults.

Continuity of care and collaboration across systems for justice-involved youth is vital because many youth who come in contact with the justice system also have contact with other service systems such as child welfare, school, and mental health systems. If these systems do not communicate with each other, resources are wasted and youth suffer. In *Cross-System Collaboration*, Macon Stewart, faculty at the Center for Juvenile Justice Reform, outlines practice examples for collaborating across systems, drawing from the Crossover Youth Practice Model from the Center for Juvenile Justice Reform. In this model, an initial step in collaboration is identifying whether youth are involved in multiple systems at the initial point of contact.

Providing a safe environment of care for youth that reduces re-traumatization is essential. This element is somewhat unique to the juvenile justice system, as youth reside in justice facilities for varying lengths of time. This is also a challenging element because of the correctional mindset that many juvenile facilities were built upon. In *Trauma and the Environment of Care in Juvenile Institutions*, Sue Burrell, staff attorney at the Youth Law Center, outlines specific areas to target in order to effectively implement this essential element. Important target areas for trauma-informed practice are discussed, such as creating a safe environment, protecting against re-traumatization, and behavior management.

Reducing disproportionate minority contact in the juvenile justice system is essential to best serve youth. In *Racial Disparities in the Juvenile Justice System: A Legacy of Trauma*, Clinton Lacey, Deputy Commissioner of the New York City Department of Probation, outlines the historical context of racial disparities and highlights how systems can move forward to reduce these racial disparities. An initial first step to address disparity, he outlines, is framing the issue so that practical and proactive discussion can move beyond assigning blame.

In addition to highlighting trauma-informed practices at the Roundtable, we learned the importance of community partnerships and providers in this work from the invited consumer panelists. The panelists identified community partners as having a great impact on their lives, as they were able to be consistently available throughout the youth's life, and some remained involved in their lives even as the youth transferred to different residential placements. This included community organization volunteers and staff, mentors, clergy, faith-based organizations, and coaches. Steve Avalos, one of the consumer panelists and a youth mentor at Homeboy Industries, a community-based organization, emphasized this point when he remarked, "It all started with education and believing in myself. And it took someone else to believe in me for me to believe in myself." (Avalos, 2013)

## New Directions

The current issues and key elements provided above lay the foundation for continued work in defining and creating trauma-informed juvenile justice systems. Importantly, creating trauma-informed juvenile justice systems does not rely solely on informing and educating systems about trauma and its impact. Trauma-informed systems also utilize trauma-informed practices, skills, and strategies that directly affect the youth in their care.

While the Roundtable cultivated a rich discussion surrounding key elements of a trauma-informed juvenile justice system, participants also provided the field with important new directions and challenges for future work. An overarching theme in our work is creating a cultural shift in juvenile justice from the correctional mindset to one that embraces trauma-informed practices that support social and emotional health, successful community reentry, and resilience, and family-oriented approaches that support youth in becoming effective adults, while still holding them accountable for their actions. Collaboration across the various domains of the juvenile justice system (e.g., juvenile courts, residential facilities, probations, mental health, etc.) is essential to moving this work forward, establishing safe and effective work and residential environments, and perhaps most importantly, to recognizing that all stakeholders — youth, families, and staff — have important roles in creating a trauma-informed juvenile justice system.

## Suggested Citation

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