



Handle with Care: Serving the Mental Health Needs of Young Offenders

Executive Summary

In 2000, the Coalition for Juvenile Justice released its Sixteenth Annual Report to the President, the Congress, and the Administrator of the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. Titled “Handle With Care: Serving the Mental Needs of Young Offenders,” the report documented the alarming prevalence of mental health conditions in young offenders, discussed the frequent mistreatment and mishandling of these youth, and called for more comprehensive systems of care for youth with mental/behavioral health needs.ⁱ

Today, in 2013, the Coalition for Juvenile Justice and other youth advocates have many of the same concerns for youth as they did over ten years ago. While there have been improvements, disturbing numbers of youth still go without services or appropriate treatment for their mental/behavioral health needs. As “Handle With Care” noted in 2000, “providing youth with humane and effective mental/behavioral health support is beyond a moral obligation... It also makes strong financial and public safety sense. Taking care of youth *is* taking care of society.”ⁱⁱ

Fast Facts:

- Approximately 20% of youth in the general population have a diagnosable mental health disorder.ⁱⁱⁱ In the juvenile justice system, 65%-70% of youth have at least one diagnosable mental health disorder.^{iv} One study found that over 60% of juvenile justice involved youth met criteria for three or more diagnoses.^v
- 70% of youth with mental health needs do not receive the care they need.^{vi} Lack of access, lack of insurance coverage, lack of referral services and specialist training, lack of stable living conditions, and lack of confidentiality all contribute to this profound percentage.^{vii}
- It is estimated that at least \$700 billion is spent annually on preventable adolescent health problems in the U.S.^{viii}
- The most successful mental health programs—those that treat young offenders in their families and communities—reduce recidivism up to 80%.^{ix}

Recommendations:

- Improve access to programs that provide mental/behavioral health services to youth. Support should be available and accessible to youth no matter when, where, or how the need is identified. Such services must be available both outside and within justice facilities and across economic, racial, gender, cultural and sexual orientation lines.
- Support evidence-based prevention and intervention programs. Encourage family-connected and community-based treatment options, that address and take into consideration the many factors related to mental/behavioral health disorders.
- Expand programs that provide quality mental health training for individuals employed in systems that regularly interact with youth, including school systems, family service systems, and justice systems.
- Develop coordinated continuums of care for youth. Build integrated (cross-agency) information management systems, document and publicize effective/promising approaches, and improve the network between state and federal agencies.

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ⁱ Coalition for Juvenile Justice (CJJ), Handle with Care: Serving the Mental Health Needs of Young Offenders (Washington, DC: Coalition for Juvenile Justice, 2000).

ⁱⁱ *ibid.*

ⁱⁱⁱ National Center for Children in Poverty, Adolescent Mental Health in the United States, (New York, NY: 2009).

^{iv} Jennie L. Shufelt and Joseph J. Coccozza, "Youth with Mental Health Disorders in the Juvenile Justice System: Results from a Multi-State Prevalence Study," (Delmar, NY: National Center for Mental Health and Juvenile Justice, 2006).

^v *ibid.*

^{vi} National Center for Children in Poverty, Adolescent Mental Health in the United States, (New York, NY: 2009).

^{vii} *ibid.*

^{viii} Coalition for Juvenile Justice (CJJ), Handle with Care: Serving the Mental Health Needs of Young Offenders (Washington, DC: Coalition for Juvenile Justice, 2000).

^{ix} *ibid.*