



## How to Improve Services for Youth Who Get Involved with Both the Child Welfare and Juvenile Justice Systems

**Karen M. Kolivoski**, Georgetown University

When she was 14 years old, child protective services found that Mia and her siblings were being abused by their mother. The abuses were severe enough the children were removed from their home. Mia stayed with her grandmother for a while, but her grandmother ultimately could not care for Mia, her younger brother, and her younger sister. Mia was sent to a foster home — and while there, Mia got into a fight with some girls her age. The police were called. The juvenile justice authorities were not informed of Mia's child welfare case and failed to notify her grandmother about her first court appearance. As a result, the judge assumed Mia had no proper guardian caring for her and required a duplicate. Justice authorities missed important information about her unique family circumstances, traumatic experiences, and needs.

To improve poor outcomes for young people like Mia, policymakers must understand the special challenges faced by vulnerable young people handled by both child welfare and criminal justice agencies. They must bolster and better coordinate early-life services to make it less likely that these young people will have to lean heavily on social services later on in life.

### Common Experiences of “Crossover Youth”

Mia falls into a category called “crossover youth,” young people who, having earlier been victims of abuse or neglect, later engage in delinquent behaviors and get moved from the child welfare to the juvenile justice system. Many of these young people have contact with both systems at the same time but fall between the cracks when the policies and protocols between the two systems falter as they did in Mia's case. This occurs for two main reasons:

- Privacy laws intended to protect children, youth, and families cover only one specific system, making the child welfare and juvenile justice systems operate within silos.
- An absence of agreed data sharing between the juvenile justice and welfare systems generates miscommunication and a general lack of collaboration.

Beyond dealing with criminal justice penalties, crossover youth experience higher rates of mental health and substance use problems than their peers, and also face educational and employment problems. Crossover youth typically follow similar trajectories — and almost all are victims of maltreatment from a parent or caregiver, as in Mia's case. Though exact estimates vary, research suggests that two out of three youth in the juvenile justice system have histories of abuse or neglect, and that makes sense because youth who have been victims are about 47 percent more likely to engage in delinquent behaviors and are more likely to get arrested as an adult than those who have not suffered abuse or neglect.

Although there are many other pathways that a youth may traverse between the juvenile justice and child welfare systems, two paths are most common. In the first scenario, a youth engages in delinquency before being in contact with the child welfare system. Their delinquency funnels them into the juvenile justice system where child welfare professionals then discover that the youth was abused or neglected. In the other typical scenario, a youth's maltreatment comes to the attention of professionals in the child welfare system first. In some of these cases, the youth's family receives services to help the family remain intact. In others, the young person is removed from the home and placed in another family-like setting such as a foster home or in a group home, after which the youth engages in delinquent behavior such as fighting or shoplifting and is charged with a juvenile offense. At that point, authorities in both systems are responsible for the same youth.

### How to Change the Systems

To improve outcomes, several changes must be made in local, state, and national systems.

- Crossover youth should be given some control over their experience. Both child welfare caseworkers and probation officers may disregard a youth's preferences as they make important decisions — determining where they will live or the level of supervision they receive. Although many youths cannot determine what will best serve them, in some cases welfare and probation professionals should jointly consider input from the young person.
- Children who have been abused and neglected often have their lives turned upside down, so policymakers must adopt or expand preventative interventions and programs that help youth build resiliency, cope with and recover from trauma, and improve self-control and decision-making. These supports can reduce problem behaviors before they start.

Such improvements will also help the social workers, probation officers, and other professionals do their work more effectively.

## Next Steps

Crossover youth are often invisible, so raising awareness is critical. Information about this population's unique vulnerabilities and needs must be provided to not only workers in the welfare and criminal justice system, but also to educators and community leaders.

Policymakers and service providers can also learn from the training programs and other interventions that have been developed to address the special needs of crossover youth. For example, the Crossover Youth Practice Model developed by the Center for Juvenile Justice Reform at Georgetown University has been implemented (or is starting) in 103 counties in 21 states. This program educates agencies that interact with crossover youth about how to share data between agencies and courts and improve policies and protocols for handling crossover youth cases. Alternatively, jurisdictions can implement the "one family, one judge" model, in which one judge presides over all family court cases, which allows the judge to get to know the people involved in dealing with a young person, preventing redundancy or dropped communications. Some jurisdictions have also set up specialized units for handling cases that crossover between the child welfare and juvenile justice systems.

**Read more in Karen Kolivoski, Jeffrey J. Shook, Kevin H. Kim, and Sara Goodkind, "Placement Type Matters: Placement Experiences in Relation to Justice System Involvement among Child Welfare-Involved Youth and Young Adults" *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment* 27 (2017): 847-864.**