

# Cross-System Collaboration

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By Macon Stewart

Youth develop within the context of their families and communities. To promote healthy growth and a strong sense of well-being for all youth, we must develop service systems that are able to manage the diverse needs of youth and families. This requires various partnerships across multiple service systems to attend to the needs of our most vulnerable youth who face significant risk factors. This level of partnership is the crux of collaboration. Cross-system collaboration enhances the strengths of partnering agencies/programs to promote a continuous system of services for youth and families.

There is a strong connection between trauma and the need for cross-system collaboration, in that a large percentage of youth involved with any system of care has experienced some degree of trauma. Research has shown that up to 34% of youth in the United States have experienced at least one traumatic event (Craig & Sprang, 2007). Among youth served by a system of care, research often speaks to the trauma that children and youth involved in the child welfare system experience as a result of being removed from their families and placed in a system that creates a degree of uncertainty about their future. A study of youth involved in the child welfare system in Maine found that one-third of females and more than two-thirds of males had a trauma-related diagnosis or were involved in child welfare as a result of a traumatic event (Cooper, Masi, Dababnah, Aratani, & Knitzer, 2007). In addition, between 75-93% of youth entering the juvenile justice system have experienced a traumatic event (Adams, 2010).

The need to address trauma from a cross-system perspective is further enhanced by the fact that child maltreatment (i.e., abuse—physical or sexual—and/or neglect) is a risk factor for delinquency. The experience of maltreatment increases a youth's likelihood to engage in delinquency by 47-55% (Ryan & Testa, 2005). The high percentage of youth involved in child welfare who experience trauma, coupled with the increased likelihood that these same youth will come into contact with the juvenile justice system—added in that these two systems are not traditionally service providers—highlights the need to address trauma in the context of cross-system collaboration.

Cross-system collaboration is a key element of a trauma-informed juvenile justice system, because youth who enter the delinquency system have challenges that cannot be addressed solely through punitive measures. These young people have been strongly influenced by their familial context and the communities in which they live. Therefore, in an effort to ensure public safety and rehabilitate youth, the juvenile justice system must be equipped to work with other systems and community partners that can assist youth in other domains of their life.

To support a trauma-informed juvenile justice system, it is important for the delinquency system to understand who these youth are and be aware of existing systems that are currently serving them at the earliest point possible. This requires the establishment of a mechanism for communication with those systems at the point of arrest or juvenile justice intake. This early communication allows for a foundation for the juvenile justice system to better understand the individual youth's psychosocial history, and presents an immediate opportunity to appropriately support youth. Early communication also impacts the systems' ability to work as a team and collectively respond to the youth's needs. This includes the gathering of assessment information and historical case planning data to assist in understanding the youth's history of trauma and how their current arrest may have further exacerbated internal triggers. Early communication sets a clear path that can dramatically impact the youth's trajectory for the better. It can impact their release from detention (and to the appropriate person), connect the juvenile justice

intake worker with the current case manager for consultation and recommendations for the initial hearing, and provide an opportunity for immediate case planning and acquisition of new services or the enhancement of existing services.

Historically cross-system collaboration has presented a challenge because of the siloed nature in which systems of care have operated. Child serving systems have been guided by statutory mandates, restrictive funding appropriations, mission/vision statements, and service plans that did not promote collaboration (Wiig & Tuell, 2008). This has had negative repercussions for the countless youth who find themselves on the receiving end of services. The recommendations for addressing these challenges are that:

- a. Agencies must acknowledge the inherent connection to other existing systems
- b. Systems must begin to cultivate relationships that focus on serving the best interests of the youth they have in common, and
- c. Systems and agencies must make a commitment (through formalized agreements) to partner/collaborate

An eye-opening experience is when agencies finally see how many youth they actually have in common and begin to understand the level of duplication that is occurring in services. Understanding the fiscal impact of failing to collaborate, and the human impact of re-traumatization (as a result of system involvement), should serve as an impetus for restructuring, reorganizing, and committing to collaborate in the creation of a trauma-informed juvenile justice system.

Through our work in implementing the Crossover Youth Practice Model (CYPM) at the Georgetown University Public Policy Institutes Center for Juvenile Justice Reform, we work with jurisdictions to develop strong collaborative relationships between child-serving agencies that lead to improvements in youth outcomes and system functioning. For more information, go to <http://cjr.georgetown.edu>.

In the CYPM, we require that each jurisdiction has the following agencies as part of their cross-system collaboration: child welfare, juvenile justice, family court, education, and behavioral health. Each of these systems has a vital role in the life of all youth who are involved with a system of care. An initial goal in our work is identification. Identification of a youth at the time of arrest or intake is critical to addressing their needs from the onset of the case. We have found that, in many jurisdictions, there is no formalized process for identifying a youth's involvement with other agencies. In many instances this lack of an identification mechanism leads to youth being held in detention for longer periods of time, and failure to provide the appropriate services due to a lack of information sharing between systems.

In all designated CYPM sites, a process for identifying a youth's involvement in other systems is created at the point of juvenile justice intake. In most instances this process confirms the youth's involvement with other systems within 24-48 hours and enacts the immediate notification of a cross-systems team to begin collaborating in the case planning process. In an effort to create a trauma-informed juvenile justice system, the immediate identification process will not only alert all relevant parties of a youth's arrest, but will allow for the exchange of assessment information to inform the decision-making process going forward. This exchange of information is protected through information sharing agreements that ensure that information acquired about a youth is only used for case planning purposes, and cannot be utilized at the charging phase or during any type of delinquency court proceeding. This level of collaboration is also required of the attorneys working on these cases. Providing the prosecutors, state's attorneys, and public defenders a vivid picture of youth and the experiences and hardships they have faced has challenged many of them to take a different approach when reviewing and filing on the pending charges. In many communities, the attorneys have established a team meeting structure to collectively review a youth's file and current charges to make a joint decision on how to move forward. In our CYPM work, cross-system collaboration is also impacting diversion opportunities to a large degree. We have found that, in several communities, foster care bias was limiting the opportunity for youth in child welfare to be offered diversion when

deemed appropriate. This bias was predicated on the assumption that no one in child welfare would ensure the youth's compliance with services, thereby pushing youth further into the juvenile justice system. Through our work, we are ensuring that all youth are offered an opportunity to participate in diversion services and, through cross-system collaboration, we are increasing the likelihood of success for all youth.

The necessity of cross-system collaboration in the creation of a trauma-informed juvenile justice system can't be overstated. Youth who enter the juvenile justice system come from various walks of life and very diverse communities. Having a system that is understanding of those dynamics and flexible enough to engage whoever those additional partners are is key to best serving youth and improving outcomes. No youth is an island unto themselves; neither is one system. Therefore it is incumbent upon us to maximize our ability to share resources and partner, because we all want to see our youth achieve in the best manner possible.

## References

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## Suggested Citations

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