Department of Community Corrections & Rehabilitation
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Trauma and Violence Exposure on Justice-Involved LGBTQA and GNC Youth

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Background

Mounting evidence shows the connection between childhood trauma and criminal behavior, both for youth and adults (Cuevas, Finkelhor, Shattuck, Turner, & Hamby, 2013; Hurley Swayze & Buskovick, 2015; Letich, 2017; Wolff, Baglivio, & Piquero, 2017). Childhood maltreatment is associated with an increased risk of running away, homelessness, criminal history, prostitution, and substance use (Espinosa, Sorensen, & Lopez, 2013; Ko et al., 2008; McIntyre & Widom, 2011; Wilber, 2015). The symptoms exhibited by survivors of maltreatment are often misinterpreted as intentionally delinquent behaviors rather than being recognized as the effects of current or historical trauma (Buckingham, 2016; Duke, Pettingell, McMorris, & Borowsky, 2010; Hurley Swayze & Buskovick, 2015; Ko et al., 2008).

While a greater understanding of trauma is beginning to influence practices in the juvenile justice system (Herz, Ryan, & Bilchik, 2010; Metzler, Merrick, Klevens, Ports, & Ford, 2017; Olafson, Halladay Goldman, & Gonzalez, 2017; Wilber, 2015), there is little research on the specific impact of trauma for justice-involved youth who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, and asexual (LGBTQA) or queer. Studies show that queer youth are overrepresented in the justice system, with the best available estimates being that 12-20% of youth in the system identify as queer (Development Services Group, Inc., 2014; Irvine, 2010; Irvine & Canfield, 2016; Wilber, 2015; Wilson et al., 2017) versus an estimated 5-8% of youth overall (Development Services Group, Inc., 2014; Wilber, 2015).

Not only are queer youth overrepresented in the juvenile justice system, they have been found to follow different paths into the system than do their peers who are both heterosexual and gender conforming. Queer youth often cross over into the juvenile justice system after experiencing

family rejection, child welfare involvement, and homelessness (Irvine & Canfield, 2016). Although general trauma-informed practices should be helpful for any youth with a history of trauma, queer youth experience unique forms of victimization and have specialized support needs (Wilber, 2015).

About the Study

Where previous research has focused on a more theoretical framework for juvenile justice systems, the Office of Policy, Planning, and Evaluation was awarded a grant through the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) to provide a practical framework for understanding trauma and pathways into the juvenile justice system and apply a trauma-informed framework specifically for corrections agencies. The study was designed to address the following questions:

- What percentage of DOCCR's juvenile services population identify as LGBTQA or gender nonconforming (GNC)?
- How does the pathway into the justice system for LGBTQA or GNC youth differ from heterosexual or cisgender youth?
- How do the experiences of LGBTQA or GNC youth compare to justice-involved heterosexual or cisgender youth?
- How trauma informed is DOCCR as an organization currently?

Summary of Key Findings

To resolve the questions listed above, PPE analysts conducted 150 surveys and 60 follow-up interviews with youth at the Juvenile Detention Center (JDC), County Home School (CHS), and on juvenile probation. A summary of key findings from survey and interview responses are described below.

- Twelve percent (12%) of the 150 youth surveyed identified as either lesbian, gay, bisexual, questioning/unsure, or asexual (LGBTQA).
- Twenty-six percent (26%) had experienced some form of gender nonconformity-based rejection (GNCR), meaning they had been kicked out, run away from home, or been bullied or harassed because of their gender expression.
- Taken together, 32% of the 150 youth surveyed identified as either LGBTQA or have experienced GNCR.

When examining the experiences and pathways into the justice system between LGBTQA or GNCR youth as compared to heterosexual, non-GNCR youth, LGBTQA or GNCR youth:

- Experienced higher instances of homelessness and were less likely to identify a trusted adult in their lives.
- Reported being removed from their home by a social worker or police officer for their own safety at higher rates.
- Reported experiencing an average of 4.5 of 10 adverse childhood events compared to 2.5 for heterosexual, non-GNCR youth.
- Experienced significantly higher rates of peer harassment, verbal abuse, neglect, physical or sexual harassment, and sexual assault.
- Reported higher overall victimization experiences, meaning they often experienced multiple instances and types of trauma as opposed to a single event.

LGBTQA/GNCR youth and heterosexual, non-GNCR youth had similar prior experiences with child protection and child welfare, criminal histories, detention involvement, and out of home placements.

Conclusions

It is a common misconception that juvenile justice systems do not serve youth who identify as LGBTQA and/or GNC (Irvine, 2010). However, youth often do not openly disclose their sexual orientation or gender identity as opposed to them being absent from the system generally. Furthermore, mounting evidence shows the connection between childhood trauma and criminal behavior (Cuevas, Finkelhor, Shattuck, Turner, & Hamby, 2013; Hurley Swayze & Buskovick, 2015; Letich, 2017; Wolff, Baglivio, & Piquero, 2017). This highlights the need for juvenile justice systems to not only develop and implement trauma-informed practices, it also requires us to have a better understanding of the youth we serve and how their experience in the juvenile justice system may serve as a risk factor for further victimization and re-traumatization. Although general trauma-informed practices should be helpful for any youth with a history of trauma, LGBTQA youth experience unique forms of victimization (D'Augelli, Grossman, & Starks, 2006; Dragowski, Halkitis, Grossman, & D'Augelli, 2011) and have specialized support needs (Wilber, 2015).

A first step becomes identifying and understanding youths' trauma histories. This involves being more intentional about identifying trauma and asking youth what they need from the system. Youth interviewed for this study responded positively to an opportunity to share their experiences. Asking questions that help the system understand youth's trauma and what they need from the system allows youth to advocate for themselves and their peers. As a result, if the system can start to identify youth's trauma, it can start to address their trauma and examine policy and procedures around how we work with youth who have experienced trauma so as not to re-traumatize them.

However, there is a difference between simply asking about whether a youth has experienced trauma and being able to recognize symptoms of trauma in that youth's behavior and demeanor (Adams, 2010; Letich, 2017). Training staff to recognize this distinction becomes increasingly critical. This practice involves routinely embedding trauma and related topics into ongoing trainings and organizational and team meetings. This includes ensuring staff have an understanding of how trauma impacts the brain, how to work with youth who have experienced trauma, and the cumulative impacts of trauma on behavior and delinquency.

To improve experiences for LGBTQA youth specifically, there is a need for culture change within the juvenile justice system rather than just a new program or standards (Wilber, 2015). Non-discrimination policies that explicitly include sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression are a foundational component, and these policies must be enacted and enforced (Wilber, 2015; Wilber et al., 2006). Staff should be trained to understand distinctions between these concepts, as well as how these components of a person's identity may interact (Wilber, 2015). Additional training is necessary to ensure that staff can interact competently with queer youth, appropriately supporting their identities while protecting their safety and privacy (Wilber, 2015). For example, basic cultural competency with transgender youth requires asking, respecting, and using each individual's pronouns according to their wishes.

Please see the full report for more information: Understanding the Role of Trauma and Violence Exposure on Justice-Involved LGBTQA and GNC Youth in Hennepin County, MN (2019).