



# PRACTICE NOTES

**AN ECOLOGICAL-  
SYSTEMS INQUIRY  
INTO RISKS FOR  
DELINQUENCY  
AMONG MALTREATED  
CHILDREN**

Twenty-one professionals, serving various roles in child welfare and juvenile justice systems, described risk factors for delinquency among maltreated children at multiple ecological levels: individual youth, parent-child relationships, and child-serving systems. Professionals also considered the involvement of maltreated children in delinquency to be a complex issue reflecting the social, cultural, and practice contexts.

## Background

The involvement of maltreated youth in the juvenile justice system is an international public health concern. In the United States, delinquency rates for maltreated youth are 47% - 53% higher than their counterparts who are not maltreated (Ryan & Testa, 2005; Widom, 1989), with recurrences of maltreatment increasing youth's risk of delinquency and recidivism (Lemmon, 2006). Such "crossover youth" are broadly defined as maltreated youth who have engaged in delinquency (Stewart, Lutz, & Herz, 2010). Involvement in the juvenile justice system compounds risks to children already vulnerable due to maltreatment and involvement in the child welfare system (Chapin & Griffin, 2005; Morris & Freundlich, 2004). Not surprisingly, crossover youth are more likely than their delinquent counterparts without maltreatment histories to experience mental health difficulties, face educational and vocational challenges, continue delinquent and/or criminal behaviors, and maltreat their own children (Halemba, Siegel, Lord, & Zawacki, 2004).



Some promising interventions, including the Crossover Youth Practice Model (Stewart, Lutz, & Herz, 2010) and Project Confirm (Conger & Ross, 2006), have been implemented to reduce the extent of maltreated youth's involvement in the juvenile justice system once they have become involved. Few interventions, however, are

“ONE OF THE THINGS THAT I'VE NOTICED IN COMMON IS A GENERATIONAL EFFECT. IN OTHER WORDS, WITH A LOT OF THESE KIDS, THEIR FATHER AND SOMETIMES THEIR GRANDFATHER HAS BEEN INVOLVED IN THE JUSTICE SYSTEM. IT'S A GENERATIONAL CYCLE.”

specifically focused on preventing maltreated youth from ever becoming involved in delinquency. The design of preventive interventions requires an understanding of the constellation of risk factors operating in multiple, embedded social systems to identify and provide support for maltreated youth at highest risk for delinquency (Cutuli et al., 2016).

An emerging body of research has identified risk factors at the individual, family, school, and child welfare levels. At the individual level, maltreatment can increase children's risk of disabilities through the adverse effects on brain development caused by exposure to violence and neglect. There are a variety of family-level risk factors for delinquent behaviors, including parents in incarceration, with mental health issues, and with a history of domestic violence. At the school level, out-of-school suspensions and affiliations with antisocial peers increase the risk for delinquency among maltreated children. Out-of-home placement, the number of changes in placement, and type of out-of-home placement affect risk for delinquent behaviors at the child welfare system's level. The previous studies have advanced our understanding of maltreated children at increased risk for delinquency and contributed to preventive interventions for those children. Yet, little research exists to provide contextual understanding of how those risk factors interact and create confounding effects on maltreated children at risk for delinquency.

## Practice Considerations

### **Sensitivity to the various presentations of child maltreatment.**

An outward manifestation of children's internal instability and insecurity, such as behavioral issues and emotional regulation difficulties, can be a clue that alerts professionals to unaddressed trauma caused by previous or ongoing maltreatment. However, presentations of psychosocial vulnerabilities based on internal attributions are relatively subtle. Professionals should be very watchful of children who display behavioral changes or emotional struggles for early identification and intervention.

**Successful engagement with parents.** The majority of parents involved in the system experience co-occurring family problems, including poverty, domestic violence, mental illness, and substance abuse. Multiple, chronic stressors within the family can derail parent engagement in interventions. Practical barriers to engaging parents include lack of transportation, conflicts between work schedules and mandated services, and in ongoing child supervision. Understanding of the various obstacles to successful parental engagement can not only bridge parental needs and necessary interventions for their children but also help parents successfully manage their parenting responsibilities.

**Cross-system collaboration.** The benefits of effective collaboration have been well-documented, including less duplication of services, more consistent intervention plans, and a broader range of services available within the systems. Successful cross-system collaborations also require psychosocial processes including individuals' values, communications, and relationships with others. Preventive interventions for maltreated children at risk for delinquency require specific attention to training and support for professionals across child-serving systems to share their own resources, languages, expectations, and different perspectives on vulnerable youth.

**Efforts to understand cultural values and norms specific to certain social and cultural groups.** Racial disproportionality and disparity in the U.S. stems from biases and stereotypes against members of specific cultural groups. The cumulative impact of such biases and stereotypes causes a climate of fear and mistrust among members of ethnic minority groups toward the systems. Reasonable efforts must be made by the professionals to understand cultural values and norms specific to certain social and cultural groups.

## CASE EXAMPLE

Our research team interviewed 21 professionals in child welfare and juvenile justice systems (e.g., child protection investigators, probation officers, attorneys, and judges) to learn their perspectives on risks for delinquency among maltreated children. Professionals described risk factors at multiple ecological levels:

First, at the individual youth level, consistent with the U.S. trauma-focused practice, the professionals interpreted youth's psychosocial vulnerabilities through a framework of trauma that focuses on an external or situational attribution of the risk.

Second, professionals equally attended to parental issues, e.g., a history of childhood maltreatment, substance abuse, and incarceration, while understanding such trauma experienced by the children in the parent-child relationships. The persistence of trauma across generations is often described as a cycle.

Third, at the child-serving system level, professionals generally perceived the importance of cross-system collaboration to better serve maltreated children. Yet, the professionals described challenges they encounter for collaboration with other systems and how such challenges may create additional risks for delinquency. A probation officer described: "The strength of the collaboration is that you have a lot of different systems that are looking at different aspects of that youth's life. So then, look at a holistic plan for that youth versus a compartmentalization, where the school says, 'Well, I'm only gonna work school issues on this kid.' Or child protection saying, 'I'm only gonna work with the parents on this, this, and this.' We're here, in probation, saying, 'Well, we're only gonna try to reduce the criminogenic factors.' I'll admit: it's a struggle at times because some people don't wanna give up control over something. It's like they have a blind spot."

Lastly, professionals' reflections on their own practice highlighted that racial disparity is strongly influenced by early decisions made at the system's front door and the professional decision-making is impacted by stereotypes and biases against specific cultural groups. A probation officer described: "Let's say a simple thing like shoplifting in the mall, we get some of those kids. I have a friend; she's white, [and] she has a 15-year-old daughter who was at Macy's and she had stolen some makeup. She left Macy's, and the police stopped her, and they took the merchandise back, and they told her don't come to the mall any more, and they let her go. But typically, with a youth of color in that scenario, the police would have been called, and they would have been charged with shoplifting. There's a lot of discretionary power with law enforcement, which drives these disproportionality numbers. You've probably heard this before: implicit bias."

## Summary

Prevention aimed at reducing the number of maltreated children crossing over to the juvenile justice system will require interventions at multiple, interacting ecological levels. This practice note aims to provide professionals with foundational knowledge of how maltreated children experience risk factors at multiple embedded

ecological systems. Social workers educated in the use of ecological models for understanding risks for delinquency can be in a strong position to identify maltreated children at the highest risk for delinquency and provide early interventions to prevent them from being involved with the juvenile justice system.

## Reflection Questions

1. In your experience, what risk factors are important to explain maltreated children who become delinquents?
2. What are the protective factors you have observed that can interrupt the pathways from maltreatment to delinquency?
3. Have you observed risk or protective factors specific to individuals from different cultural backgrounds?
4. What could you do to share this information with the collaborative professionals who provide services to maltreated children at risk for delinquency?

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