

Prevalence and Characteristics of Multi-System Youth in Washington State

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Catherine Pickard, MSW, MPP

Youth involved with either the child welfare or juvenile justice system are often identified as a high-risk population who are in need of services and intervention programs. Child welfare system involvement can be an indicator for a history of adverse childhood experiences, including the trauma of neglect, or emotional, physical, or sexual abuse. Prior research has documented that youth in foster care have a substantially higher need for behavioral and mental health treatment than the general population.¹ Juvenile justice system involvement has also been associated with increased need for services, including mental health and substance abuse treatment, with females in even greater need than their male counterparts.² Taking into account the obstacles presented for youth with either child welfare or juvenile justice involvement, a population of youth who are in particular need are “multi-system” youth, or those who “cross-over” and are involved with both the child welfare and juvenile justice system. Past research has identified such multi-system youth as at higher risk for negative outcomes, including a higher rate of juvenile offender recidivism, a greater need for treatment than youth in a single system, and reduced educational success.³ While multi-system youth have been identified as at higher-risk, additional research is necessary to enhance our understanding of the particular needs of this population. The Washington State Center for Court Research’s multi-system youth project builds upon the King County-based efforts of Uniting for Youth and the Models for Change report “Doorways to Delinquency”⁴, with the objective of inspiring state-wide action towards system reform. Informing policy makers, courts, and other stakeholders about the prevalence and consequences of multi-system involvement can lead to improved interventions and services for this vulnerable population. This report, the first in a series intended to improve the understanding of multi-system youth in Washington, presents results from a study of demographic characteristics and trajectory of system involvement.

WHO ARE “MULTI-SYSTEM” YOUTH?
Multiple terms are used to describe youth who have involvement with both the juvenile justice and child welfare system.

MULTI-SYSTEM, CROSSOVER, AND DUAL STATUS⁵ YOUTH

Terms used to describe youth who have involvement in both the child welfare and juvenile justice systems. These terms do not take into consideration the trajectory of a youth’s system involvement, i.e. a youth may enter juvenile justice prior to child welfare, or vice-versa. They also do not indicate if a youth is actively involved in either system, but acknowledge a record of involvement in both systems.

KEY FINDINGS

Of all youth referred to juvenile justice in the state of Washington in 2010, 43.9% of these youth had a history of involvement with the child welfare system (Children’s Administration)⁶ (Figure 1, Page 2).

Youth from the 2010 juvenile justice cohort were divided into three groups determined by their **highest** level of involvement with the child welfare system: 1) no history of child welfare system involvement (56.1%) 2) at least one referral and investigation by Child Protective Services and not placed out of the home (31.3%), or 3) legal activity and/or an out-of-home child welfare placement (12.7%).⁷

Females and minority youth with a history of child welfare system contact have a higher likelihood of multi-system involvement (Table 1, Page 3).⁸

Females account for 33.7% of the population of juvenile justice referred youth with no history of child welfare system involvement, yet the representation of females increases to 43.1% of juvenile justice referred youth with a history of legal activity and/or out-of-home child welfare placement.

Among youth who have **both a delinquency and status referral⁹** in 2010, females made up 27.7% of youth with no history of child welfare involvement, in contrast to 44.8% of those with legal activity and/or an out-of-home child welfare placement.

Multi-system youth are referred to the juvenile justice system at an earlier age than youth with no history of child welfare system involvement (Figure 2, Page 2). Multi-system youth with a more extensive child welfare history experience their first juvenile justice referral an average of 1.5 years earlier than youth with no child welfare history (13.2 versus 14.7 years old at time of first referral to juvenile justice).

STUDY DESIGN

To examine the characteristics and prevalence for multi-system youth and establish a baseline understanding for this population, records from Washington Courts' Juvenile Information System and Juvenile Court System were matched to the Department of Social and Health Services/Children's Administration data (FamLink). Individual cases were carefully linked between systems using key person identifiers, such as name, date of birth, and gender. A system to routinely match cases across systems does not currently exist, therefore once an individual was matched between systems, they were assigned a unique linking identification number. The result was a person-level record that enables tracking system contact across time.

The population included in this study are the 31,388 youth who experienced at least one delinquency and/or one status referral (At-Risk Youth, Child in Need of Services, or Truancy) to a juvenile court within the state of Washington in 2010. This number reflects youth who were between the ages of 8-17 at the time of their referral on an offender matter, and includes all youth referred to court in 2010 regardless of the outcome of the case (dismissal, diversion, adjudication, etc.). This study excludes youth who were referred to court in 2010 due to a juvenile infraction, such as speeding or driving without a license, or a minor in possession of tobacco.

Youth were assigned to one of three groups based upon the highest level of child welfare system involvement that occurred prior to the youth's juvenile justice referral in 2010.¹⁰ Group 1 includes youth with no history of child welfare system involvement. Group 2 are those youth who have a history of one or more referrals to Child Protective Services (CPS)

accepted for investigation, but did not result in an out-of-home placement.¹¹ Group 3 is considered the highest level of child welfare system involvement and includes youth with any history of a child welfare out-of-home residential placement and/or legal activity that resulted in a dependency case.¹²

Figure 1: Highest Level of Child Welfare System Involvement Prior to 2010 Referral to the Juvenile Justice System

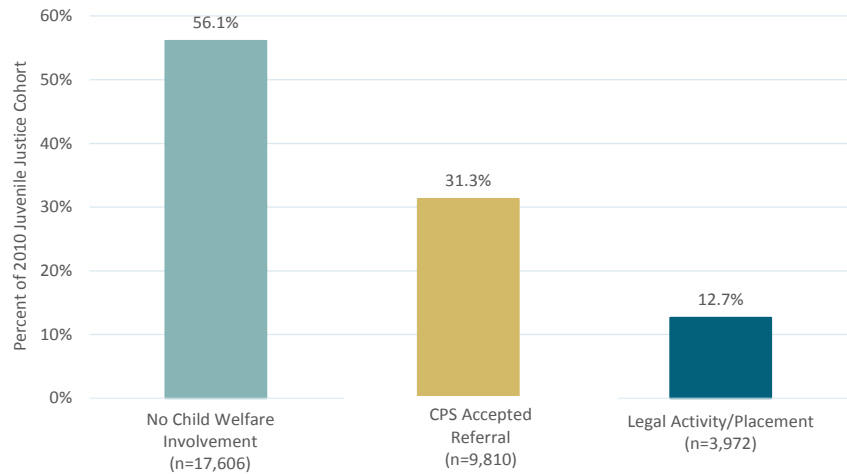


Figure 2: Type of First Juvenile Justice Referral Experienced by the 2010 Juvenile Justice Cohort and Average Age at Time of Referral

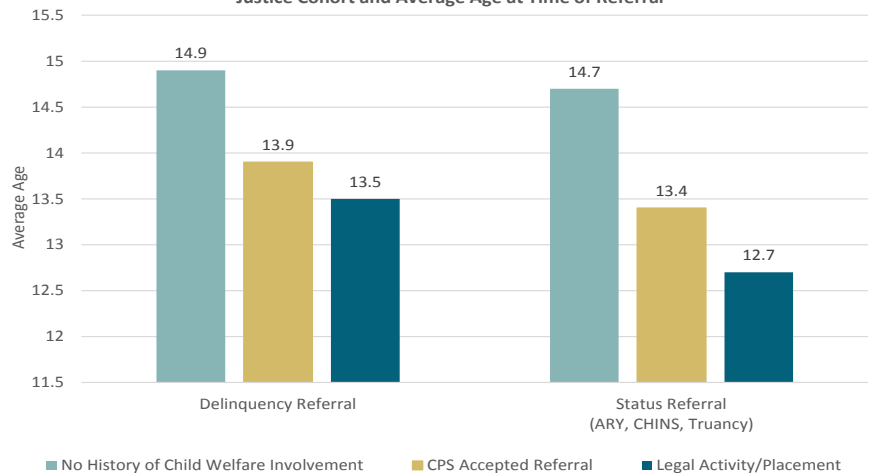
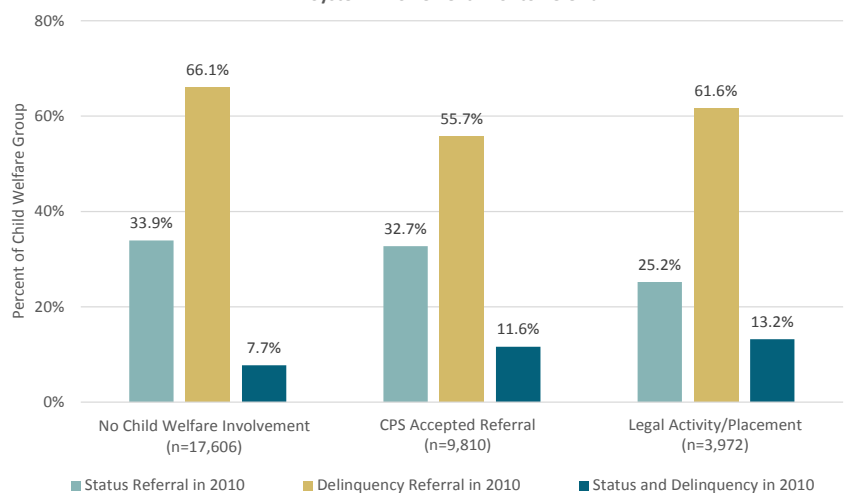


Figure 3: Type of Juvenile Justice Referral in 2010 and Highest Level of Child Welfare System Involvement Prior to Referral



SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Some of the most notable findings of this study pertain to the population of youth who are identified as at highest risk of becoming multi-system involved. Females and minority youth are at a significantly higher risk of transitioning from the child welfare system to juvenile justice. Age at entry into the child welfare system may also indicate an increased risk for juvenile justice system involvement. For youth in this study, those who entered the child welfare system at an earlier age were more likely to enter the juvenile justice system at a younger age than juvenile justice referred youth with no history of child welfare system involvement. It was also found that youth with a history of legal activity and/or out-of-home child welfare placement were more likely to be referred to the juvenile justice system through multiple avenues. Youth with a history of child welfare system involvement were more likely to experience more than one type of referral to juvenile justice in 2010, with at least one delinquency and at least one status referral occurring within the calendar year (Figure 3).

The findings presented in this paper are not intended to correlate negative outcomes with system involvement, rather they should encourage discussion about the unique experiences of multi-system youth and how we can minimize risk for continued system involvement. Cross system coordination and collaboration will be instrumental in successfully improving outcomes for youth and families who are currently, or are at high risk of becoming, multi-system involved.¹⁵

Stakeholders are encouraged to consider the following questions;

- **How do we currently respond to multi-system youth?**
- **How can we use policy, programs, and innovation to increase positive outcomes?**
- **How can you take action to play a role in improving the outcomes for this population of youth and their families?**

Upcoming reports will more closely examine the level of youth involvement with the juvenile justice system, including type of crime and frequency of referral for both delinquency and status offenses. Available data allows for the analysis of sub-populations and a more in-depth examination of outcomes for youth who have been identified as at highest risk of becoming multi-system involved. An area of particular interest involves the characteristics that separate crossover youth with a delinquency referral from those who have experienced a status referral to juvenile court. The Washington State Center for Court Research (WSSCR) will continue to work with data from both the Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC) and Children’s Administration, with an anticipated expansion of information from the State of Washington Education Research and Data Center and the Department of Social and Health Services. It is anticipated that research studies conducted by WSSCR will contribute to the improved understanding of the multi-system youth population, and will be used to inform response and stimulate reform. As change is implemented, WSSCR and the AOC can continue to maintain a multi-system youth dataset and contribute to the evaluation of program implementation and change in youth outcomes.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics by Highest Level of Child Welfare System Involvement Prior to 2010 Referral to the Juvenile Justice System

Demographic Characteristics	Full 2010 Cohort (n=31,388)	No Child Welfare Involvement (n=17,606)	CPS Accepted Referral (n=9,810)	Legal Activity or Out-of-Home Placement (n=3,972)
Gender				
Female	37.2%	33.7%	41.1%	43.1%
Male	62.7	66.2	58.9	56.9
Race				
African American ¹³	10.3%	8.7%	11.0%	15.7%
Asian	3.9	4.8	2.9	2.1
Native American or Alaska Native ¹⁴	4.0	2.7	4.4	9.0
White	71.1	70.1	74.1	68.4
Unknown	11.8	14.4	9.5	8.0
Ethnicity				
Hispanic	18.0%	20.8%	15.2%	13.2%
Age				
Average Age at First 2010 Juvenile Justice Referral	15.4 Years	15.6 Years	15.2 Years	15.1 Years
Average Age at Very First Juvenile Justice Referral	14.2	14.7	13.7	13.2
Average Age at First Child Welfare System Contact	NA	NA	9.1	7.1

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 Pecora, P.J., Jensen, P.S., Romanelli, L.H., Jackson, L.J., & Ortiz, A. (2009). Mental health services for children placed in foster care: An overview of current challenges. *Child Welfare, 88*(1), 5-26.
- 2 Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. (2010). *Youth's Needs and Services: Findings from the survey of youth in residential placement*. Washington D.C.: Sedlak, A.J., & McPherson, K.S.
- 3 Herz, D.C., Ryan, J.P., & Bilchik, S. (2010). Challenges Facing Crossover Youth: An examination of juvenile-justice decision making and recidivism. *Family Court Review, 48*(2), 305-321.
- 4 Halemba, G. & Siegel, G. (2011). *Doorways to Delinquency: Multi-System Involvement of Delinquent Youth in King County*. Pittsburgh: National Center for Juvenile Justice.
- 5 Wiig, J.K. & Tuell, J.A., & Heldman, J.K. (2013). *Guidebook for Juvenile Justice & Child Welfare System Coordination and Integration, 3rd Edition*. Boston: Robert F. Kennedy Children's Action Corps. <http://www.rfknrcjj.org/images/PDFs/Guidebook-for-JJ-and-CW-System-Coordination-and-Integration-Cover.pdf>.
- 6 Children's Administration is the child welfare division of the Department of Social and Health Services of Washington State.
- 7 The date of initial Children's Administration legal activity and/or out-of-home child welfare placement is unavailable for 306 youth from the 2010 juvenile justice referred cohort. Based upon characteristics of these youth, including their age and initial juvenile justice contact date, they have been included in the count of youth with child welfare system involvement prior to the 2010 juvenile justice referral.
- 8 A proportion of racial demographic information is absent from the juvenile justice and child welfare datasets. Race is reported as unknown for 8% of youth with a history of legal activity and/or out-of-home child welfare placement. Race is also unknown for 15.2% of youth who have a referral to Child Protective Services as their highest level of child welfare involvement.
- 9 Juvenile Status Offenses fall under the 1995 "Becca Bill" (RCW 13.32A.010). There are three types of status offense in WA state:
TRUANCY: Upon the accrual of 7 unexcused absences during a month or at the 10th unexcused absence within the school year, the school will file a petition to juvenile court to order the student to attend school. This rule applies to children between the ages of 8 and 18 with some exceptions for youth 16 or older.
AT-RISK YOUTH PETITION: An At-Risk Youth (ARY) Petition is a process by which a parent of an at-risk youth can file a petition requesting assistance from the juvenile court in the form of services and resources.
CHILD IN NEED OF SERVICES: A Child in Need of Services (CHINS) petition can be filed by the youth, a parent, or a representative from the Department of Social and Health Services. A CHINS petition can result from various situations, including: youth who are considered beyond parental control, youth in need of necessary services (food, clothing, shelter), or youth who are considered a sexually exploited child.
- 10 Children's Administration data is currently available through the end of calendar year 2013. As data is updated, and future research studies are performed, the percent of youth from the 2010 juvenile justice referred cohort with child welfare involvement could rise.
- 11 When a CPS referral is received by Children's Administration, the allegation is assessed to determine "If the allegation were true, does it meet the legal definition of abuse and/or neglect?" If the answer to this question is "yes", CPS will "accept" the referral and investigate the allegation. The investigation will determine if the allegation is founded or unfounded, and the finding will guide Children's Administration in determining how to proceed with the case.
- 12 Current data does not allow for the identification of active versus closed Children's Administration cases at the time of juvenile justice referral.
- 13 2010 US Census data reported that 3.6% of the Washington State population identified as "Black or African American" and 4.7% of the Washington state population identified as "Two of More Races." U.S. Census Bureau. (2010). Profile of General Population and Housing Characteristics: 2010 Demographic Profile Data. More demographic data can be retrieved online at: <http://www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/doc/dpsf.pdf>
- 14 Only 1.5% of Washington State residents identified as "American Indian and Alaska Native Alone" in the 2010 US Census Profile of General Population and Housing Characteristics: 2010 Demographic Profile Data.
- 15 Chuang, E., & Wells, R. (2010). The role of interagency collaboration in facilitating receipt of behavioral health services for youth involved with child welfare and juvenile justice. *Child Youth Services Review, 32*(12), 1814-1822.



Administrative Office of the Courts
Washington State Center for Court Research
1206 Quince Street SE
Olympia, WA 98053
www.courts.wa.gov