



Youth in juvenile justice system need help, not punishment or stigma

Beth McDaniel, Alabama Voices

Published 12:31 p.m. CT Dec. 11, 2017



(Photo: Getty Images)

Mental health resources in Alabama schools, communities and particularly in our justice system are woefully lacking. Delinquent acts often indicate underlying problems that need attention, such as unmet mental and physical health needs, exposure to poverty, crime and other adverse experiences, or a lack of public services and educational opportunities that facilitate positive youth development. The Alabama justice system, however, is structured to punish the behaviors rather than to understand and treat the underlying issues the behaviors reflect.

Mental health — our psychological, emotional and social well-being — often influences our behaviors and responses to stress and conflict. Mental health problems can arise from experiences of trauma and abuse and from prolonged exposure to stress and adverse life experiences, and health disparities are more prominent among minority youth and youth living in low-resourced communities. Mental illness is a predictor of criminal behavior, and youth in the juvenile justice system often have underlying behavioral and emotional issues that manifest in poor decisions and regrettable, sometimes unlawful, actions.

More: [For juvenile lifers, justice shifts slowly \(/story/news/2017/07/31/juvenile-lifers-justice-shifts-slowly/524453001/\)](/story/news/2017/07/31/juvenile-lifers-justice-shifts-slowly/524453001/)

The mental health needs of youth involved in the juvenile justice system are greater than in the general population of adolescents. About 80 percent of justice-involved youth meet criteria for two or more substance abuse or mental health disorders, and between 60 and 80 percent of justice-involved youth meet criteria for a psychiatric diagnosis.

Detention centers may exacerbate a youth's pre-existing problems and experiences of trauma. Rates of depression, alongside anxiety and mood disorders, are significantly higher among juvenile offenders than among non-justice-involved youth.

Despite the prevalence of mental illness in the juvenile justice system, resources to address it are limited, to say the least. Throughout Alabama's 67 counties, only three juvenile courts focus on treatment and aim to divert youth from detention facilities. Due to the lack of available mental health services within the community, parents and educators often relinquish youth to the juvenile justice system to access mental health treatment. The lack of access to resources and services to support youth contribute to the harmful criminalization of mental illness. Alabama legislators should focus on expanding community mental health resources and fulfilling the rehabilitative mission of the juvenile justice system.

More: [Criminal justice system treats children like small adults \(/story/opinion/columnists/2017/12/05/criminal-justice-system-treats-children-like-small-adults/923663001/\)](/story/opinion/columnists/2017/12/05/criminal-justice-system-treats-children-like-small-adults/923663001/)

For youth involved in the juvenile justice system, we should increase efforts to:

- Provide evidence-based mental health and substance abuse screening to youth committed to secure facilities, provide effective mental health treatment while in detention, and link youth to follow-up services upon release.
- Divert youth from incarceration and facility commitment by investing in evidence-based programs as alternatives to incarceration, like Functional Family Therapy, Thinking for a Change and Aggression Replacement Training which, when implemented in Georgia, resulted in reduced juvenile commitment rates.
- Implement community-based programs to prevent substance abuse and other mental health disorders.
- Engage in restorative justice approaches that bring together the accused, the victim, and community members; such programs allow youth to consider the consequences of their actions and make amends.
- Support children's social and emotional development by providing parents and teachers with access to age-appropriate child development education. Such programs may also increase parental awareness of community resources that assist in meeting family needs.
- Ensure schools are equipped with adequate mental health services and clinicians that can provide assessment, screening and counseling services and referrals to additional community resources.

The lives of our youth, and their health and wellbeing, are shaped and influenced by their environments. Some children are born into supportive and well-resourced circumstances that enable them to be healthy and successful, while others are less fortunate. None of these children, however, have a say in this matter, and the value attached to their lives should not be determined by these uncontrollable circumstances. Youth caught up in the justice system face significant stigma. We as a community often lose our ability to view them as a person and fail to consider the life experiences that may have led to

their involvement. We no longer acknowledge their strengths, talents, or hopes for the future, but instead label them a "criminal" or "delinquent." When we respond in this manner, we fail our youth and our society.

Engaged citizenship is critical to the healthy functioning of a democratic society, and it is in our collective interest to support our youth within their communities so that they become successful, invested, and engaged citizens. Ensuring that quality mental health services are available to at-risk youth may lower recidivism rates, contributing to their future success and the success of our communities.

Much more work is needed to ensure our juvenile justice system rehabilitates youth and allows them to develop into productive members of society. Reform efforts, like the Alabama Juvenile Justice Task Force and legislative language coming from this group, will require a multi-layered approach and must prioritize mental health services. Although these efforts may require up-front investments, the long-term benefits will outweigh the costs. We owe it to our youth to try. When the Alabama Legislature meets in January 2018, they must consider funding juvenile mental health services a priority.

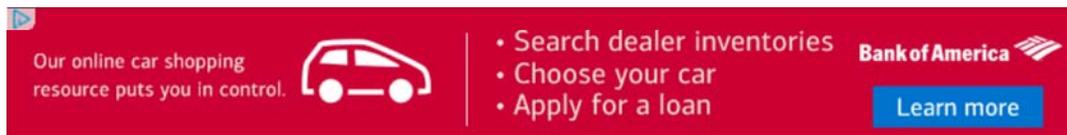
Beth McDaniel is a graduate student in the Human Development and Family Studies Department at Auburn University, where she studies the development of compassion, social skills and positive social relationships, behavioral and physiological regulation when confronting stressors, cultural and racial sensitivity and civic responsibility and engagement.

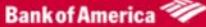
Sources

Children's mental health: Why is children's mental health important? www.apa.org/pi/families/children-mental-health.aspx (<http://www.apa.org/pi/families/children-mental-health.aspx>)

www.apa.org/news/press/statements/juvenile-justice.aspx (<http://www.apa.org/news/press/statements/juvenile-justice.aspx>)APA Statement on Reforming the Juvenile Justice System to Improve Children's Lives and Public Safety (2010).

Read or Share this story: <http://www.montgomeryadvertiser.com/story/opinion/columnists/2017/12/11/youth-juvenile-justice-system-need-help-not-punishment-stigma/931314001/>



Our online car shopping resource puts you in control.  • Search dealer inventories • Choose your car • Apply for a loan  [Learn more](#)