

## The NCTSN National Juvenile Probation Officer Survey

### Youth on Probation

The court system is a common entry point for youth who have experienced trauma and are in need of treatment services. Youth going through the court system are often ordered by the court to participate in juvenile probation. In 2013, of the 716,000 justice involved youth, 54% (383,600) received court-ordered probation and 12% received out-of-home placement such as correctional facilities, group homes, and residential treatment facilities.

The Office of Juvenile Justice Delinquency and Prevention refers to juvenile probation as the “work horse of the juvenile justice system.” Probation is the most frequently used community-based court order for lower level offenders and is used to keep justice-involved youth living in their communities, attending their schools, and working at their jobs, with the intent of preventing more serious delinquent behavior and the use of harsher consequences, e.g., out-of-home placement. Probation involves regular meetings with a probation officer as well as attending to other conditions of probation such as chemical dependency and mental health treatment, community service, and restitution. In essence, the probation officer serves as the court’s eyes and ears while the youth is involved in the justice system.



### Child Traumatic Stress in Justice Involved Youth

Risk behaviors and delinquency take place within a larger social context which often times is the result of exposure to chronic and complex traumatic events. The evidence suggests that between 70 to 96% of justice-involved youth have been exposed to at least one traumatic event (Abram et al., 2002). In fact, justice-involved youth are twice as likely to meet the criteria for PTSD, similar to service members returning from deployment in Operation Iraqi Freedom (Ford et al 2012).

## Background

According to the Center for Juvenile Justice Reform, interagency collaboration is critical to removing barriers for justice-involved youth as they integrate into the community (CJJR). Therefore, exploring the role of a probation officer, the “eyes and ears of the court,” is vital to developing and maintaining interagency collaboration between probation and mental health treatment.

To be a group focused on making a service system more trauma-informed, it is essential to include partners that are key members of that service system. The NCTSN Justice Consortium consists of child trauma clinicians, researchers, federal juvenile justice partners, national organizations, and local court officials (judges and attorneys) across the country. Through a collaborative process we created the publication *Ten Things Every Judge Should Know About Child Trauma*, *Judges Benchcards*, and several joint national conference presentations and webinars.

Because probation officers are so crucial in supporting youth and recommending court decisions, in 2013 we decided to reach out to probation officers nationwide via a survey to find out what they know about trauma, how best we could collaborate with them, and what products they would like the NCTSN to produce to meet their needs with respect to trauma-informed practices.

## Survey Development

To develop an effective survey with appropriate language, we needed first to conduct meetings with a subset of our target population. Meetings were conducted with personnel from two Juvenile/Family Court systems in Ohio in order to determine which topic areas might be most useful to approach within the survey. Probation Officers, Court Administrators, and Hearing Officers from these Courts provided their views regarding the ways in which information on the trauma history of a youth may be gathered, assessed, and utilized within the context of the Juvenile Justice System. The areas of inquiry selected by participating Court personnel also produced sample questions that were refined gradually as the survey was developed.

## Survey Results

### Information About the Survey

With the NCTSN being a network founded and maintained in the art of collaboration, the Justice Consortium asked our over 200 Network members to help outreach to juvenile probation departments across the country. This survey dissemination approach is called relationship-based dissemination, asking probation departments with existing relationships to complete the survey and help disseminate it to other departments in an effort to help us learn more about their role within the juvenile justice system. Following outreach through members across the network, the survey was distributed to state and local juvenile probation administrators who further disseminated the survey throughout their state. Forty-five states participated with at least one response. In total, 2,320 juvenile probation officers (JPOs) started the survey, 2,284 provided consent to participate, and 1,875 indicated that they currently carried a youth caseload making them eligible. After removing surveys with excessive missing data, the final sample size was 1,747. Seventy-six percent of the respondents indicated their job title as a Juvenile Probation Officer with evenly divided across urban (36%), suburban (26%), and rural (38%) settings. The sample contained more female (56%) than male (44%) respondents with the majority of the sample identifying as White/Caucasian (70%). Respondents indicated an average of 10 years of experience working in juvenile justice.

## Survey Results

The first part of the collaboration process was to understand how the other partners view their role in the lives of the children on their probation caseload. With this in mind, respondents were surveyed about what they identified as their job roles and primary goals.

Enforcing court orders was the most frequent endorsed job role (87%); however, the roles of advocate and social work were also endorsed by over 50% of respondents, reflecting that JPOs view their role as both supervisory and supportive in nature. Similarly, their probation goals for youth on their caseloads were evenly distributed between reducing recidivism (48%) and improving youth functioning (49%).

A majority of JPOs (68%) indicated having received formal training in trauma through a workshop. Despite many respondents having received trauma training, many respondents indicated wanting more training on specific trauma topics including: identifying trauma-related needs (62%), survival strategies of traumatized youth (60%), the impact of trauma on youth (59%), developing an effective case plan (52%), and how to engage in self-care as a JPO (47%). JPO self-care emerged as an important training element; about 50% of the sample identified one or more job stressors related to managing their caseloads, including the needs of the youth/families exceeding available resources (63%), youth/family motivation (72%), and case complexity (52%).

In terms of daily trauma-informed practices, 55% of the respondents indicated that their office routinely screens for trauma. However, less than 40% indicated that this screening occurs through a standard trauma screening tool. Instead, a variety of structured and unstructured methods are used with youth in their caseloads. Almost all respondents (94%) indicated some attempt to obtain information about youth exposure to traumatic events from youth caregivers/legal guardians. Similar to screening, 56% of respondents indicated awareness of trauma-specific interventions, but when asked to list interventions, only one-third of respondents listed common trauma-specific interventions, such as Trauma Focused-Cognitive Behavioral Therapy. Instead of relying on screening results to inform referral decisions, over 70% of respondents indicated that referrals for treatment are based on either youth or caregiver disclosure of a traumatic event disclosure or youth disclosure of trauma symptoms.

## Summary and Conclusion

Juvenile probation officers have widespread interest in understanding the impact of trauma on the youth they supervise. NCTSN and our partners can support JPO's by widely disseminating the information they want about trauma and youth in formats they most frequently access.

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### Suggested Citation

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### About the National Child Traumatic Stress Network

Established by Congress in 2000, the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) is a unique collaboration of academic and community-based service centers whose mission is to raise the standard of care and increase access to services for traumatized children and their families across the United States. Combining knowledge of child development, expertise in the full range of child traumatic experiences, and attention to cultural perspectives, the NCTSN serves as a national resource for developing and disseminating evidence-based interventions, trauma-informed services, and public and professional education.