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# Pathways to Prison: Life Histories of Former Clients of the Child Welfare and Juvenile Justice Systems

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*This study examines the relationship between child maltreatment and future offending from the viewpoint of former clients. Imprisoned adults describe their experiences in child welfare and juvenile justice system services. Specifically, those placed out of the home originally into the child welfare system have a different perspective on their path to prison than those placed into the juvenile justice system as delinquents. The study contributes to the literature by examining the relationship between the services children receive in the child welfare system as well as the juvenile justice system and their imprisonment as adults from a former service recipient's point of view.*

One of the primary goals of the child welfare system is to provide a safe alternative for abused and neglected children to grow and develop. Unfortunately, the children placed in that system often end up as recipients of juvenile justice services for committing illegal acts later in their youth. In some cases, these individuals continue to offend and are eventually imprisoned as adults. This paper describes a research project designed to explore the relationship between child welfare and juvenile justice services and eventual adult imprisonment. Unlike much of the previous research assessing the link between maltreatment and illegal behavior, as both a juvenile and an adult, this project is based on the impressions of former clients of these service systems. In the context of life history interviews, former service recipients, currently incarcerated as adults, provide alternative explanations for their imprisonment based on whether their legal and service

histories began as maltreated or delinquent children. A brief review of the relevant literature relating to child maltreatment and offending behavior will precede the discussion of the study.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Although the research linking child maltreatment and offending behavior is often flawed (Widon, 1989), there is some credible evidence connecting these two sets of circumstances (Widon, 1989). However, it is critical to also recognize that many abused or neglected children do not go on to commit illegal acts (Widon, 1991). Other research has found that a more consist link occurs between abuse and status offenses (Zingraff, Leiter, Myers, & Johnson, 1993). In addition to identifying these connections, these researchers agree that it is difficult to fully understand the relationship between maltreatment and offending without knowing more about the impact of services children receive as a result of their maltreatment on eventual illegal offenses (Widon, 1991; Zingraff, Leiter, Myers, & Johnson, 1993).

A similar discussion takes place when this discussion shifts to the impact of juvenile delinquency on adult offending. Although youth involved in delinquent acts are more likely to commit illegal behavior as adults (Wolfgang, Thornberry, & Figlio, 1987; Sampson & Laub, 1993), there is still a significant group of juvenile delinquents that cease their illegal behavior as adults (McCord, 1979; and Wolfgang, Thornberry, & Figlio, 1987). In both cases, the incidence of maltreatment or offending as a child does not necessarily lead to illegal behavior. This leaves a critical question: what is significant about those children that do eventually offend that is different from the considerable number that do not?

Some light can be shed on this issue by examining the relationship between delinquency services and adult offenses. While meta-analyses has provided evidence that those in treatment are less likely to offend (Whitehead & Lab, 1989; Palmer, 1991; Lipsey, 1992), others have argued that treatment programs do not address core factors that lead to offending behavior (Jenson & Howard, 1998). Although the effects of juvenile services on adult offending remain unclear, there are two related studies that stimulated the research project that is the focus of this paper.

When youth were followed from a specific juvenile residential treatment facility to prison, a high-risk profile was identified. African American youth with two or more felony adjudications at intake to the residential juvenile program placed in an out-of-home settings at discharge were more likely to be imprisoned in adulthood. Another critical finding was that children placed in the residential setting as child welfare cases, not adjudicated of any illegal behavior, were as likely to go to prison as adults as the delinquent children (Kapp, Schwartz, & Epstein, 1993; Schwartz, Kapp, & Overstreet, 1994; and Collins, Schwartz, & Epstein, in press). These studies and the aforementioned literature highlight some critical questions that drove the design of this study. Why are children placed in a residential facility as child welfare clients as likely to eventually go to prison as delinquent youth from the same facility? and What are the unmet cultural, systemic, and service needs of the high risk youth that often end up in prison as adults? Building on the previous efforts, this research explores the relationship between the delivery of services for maltreated and delinquent children and subsequent illegal behavior as a youth and an adult.

## METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach relying on life history interviews with former clients of the child welfare and juvenile systems about their experiences with services. The interview was conducted jointly with the participants by asking them to reconstruct their own personal history within the child welfare and juvenile justice system. Specific questions were used to identify the exact placements and their timing, but few other structured questions were asked beyond what the young man thought of each facility. This allowed the individual to identify and expound on issues as he felt necessary. The researcher listened for ideas relating their evaluations of various services, along with ideas they may have for future program innovation. A very similar organization was utilized in Clifford Shaw's classic work—*The Jack-roller*. In that instance, he created the sequence of placements for the juvenile in his study and then asked the youth to write an autobiographical account of his experience within that structure (Shaw, 1930).

The data from the interviews were documented by the interviewer's handwritten notes.

### *The Sample*

This study employed a convenience sample. Initially, these individuals were identified from a group of individuals formerly placed at a specific juvenile facility and currently imprisoned (Kapp, Schwartz, & Epstein, 1993). It is worthwhile to note that this study has focused only on imprisoned young men. The pragmatics of locating participants compelled us to focus on these individuals. Although pursuing those living in the community would be an excellent companion approach, resource limitations did not permit it.

Individual prisons were targeted based on two criteria: a significant number of participants from the previous study and an administration that would be likely to cooperate with the study procedures. Potential participants were sent a letter inviting them to participate and describing the informed consent procedures. Those that responded favorably were interviewed. In-depth interviews were conducted with eight individuals for two to three hours apiece. Seven of the eight interviewees were African American.

After a set of preliminary analyses was conducted, the interviewer conducted additional individual interviews with some of the participants and solicited their feedback on the tentative conclusions. The initial findings were presented to them and their reactions were solicited. Their impressions were very helpful in minimizing the biases in the research method, clarifying concepts, and reinforcing the initial findings.

### *Data Analysis*

The analysis strategy for this project attempted to fully exploit both the breadth and depth offered by these data. Initially, efforts focused on gaining a full appreciation of the participants' description of their experiences. Next, common themes and responses were organized and reviewed using a content analysis software package (Researchware, 1993). To examine some differences in the ways incipient criminality is perceived by these young men the analysis focused on the structure of the narratives used by

these individuals to tell their stories. Pertti Alasuutari (1995) has suggested comparing life stories at a more abstract level. Each story plot has a structure that should be recognized. He proposed breaking down components of the story according to the relevance to the plot. Emphasis is then placed on making plot summaries for comparing and contrasting the text. Identified story types can then be tied to each plot. These plots were examined for their linkage to a type of world view. This data analysis technique was very useful in trying to understand the notion of responsibility and its role as it relates to future involvement with the criminal justice system.

## FINDINGS

The descriptions of the respective paths to prisons differed by the legal reason for the original out of home placement: child maltreatment (child welfare youth) or illegal behavior (delinquent youth). Child welfare youth were placed in the system after being abused or neglected by a care giver. After multiple placements as younger children, these individuals eventually found themselves in residential treatment and institutional facilities as adolescents. These facilities were populated predominantly by youth with histories of delinquent behavior (Kapp, Schwartz, Epstein, 1993).

### *Child Welfare Youth*

As expected, the child welfare youth were placed out of home earlier in life (between the ages of 7–9 versus early to mid-teens for delinquent youth) because they had been abused or neglected by their caretakers in one way or another. Consequently, they lived in more out-of-home placements for a longer period of time. In addition to the length of their experience, another major difference is the way the young men seem to hold the system responsible for their circumstances.

For each of these young men, a major life event in the child welfare system functions as a turning point, after which they seemed to have given up hope. The critical events are key points where the ultimate goal of living with a family or living on their own was thwarted. Additionally they held the system accountable for their loss of hope. This progression is clarified by examining some of the events. In two of the cases, the young man was

removed from a foster home that was intended to be an adoptive home. "You know what caused me to be alleviated from there, check this out man. It was Christmas. They parents came, they look at you with an evil eye. Knew something was wrong but not told directly. After the celebration, the female started packing my stuff. Let me know that I was leaving. My caseworker picked me up on Monday or Tuesday. I didn't find out until after I left, the caseworker divulged, "Those white people's parents told them if they did not get rid of this Nigger, they were going to divorce you from the family".

The second youth described the intended adoptive home as a positive place. "Felt good about myself, and I liked it at that time of my life." But he could not stay there, "Illegal for me to be living there until papers were signed." During the interim, an alternative placement was chosen in a different city where a critical event occurred, "One day, I was talking to another girl whose brother was at [a different facility] with me. My girlfriend got jealous, she hit me in the mouth with the door and I went off on her. On February 15th, 1985, my adoptive mother left me a note and \$10 wishing me a good life. After that I did not care." This person definitely saw the dismissal by his potential adoptive mother as a turning point in his life. Although one could argue that his behavior may have influenced the outcome of this event, he ascribed the failure of his adoptive home to being in an unnecessary placement.

The third example is related to placement in a facility geared to providing independent living opportunities. After numerous placements from a very young age, this young man was placed in this facility with high hopes of being able to eventually live on his own. Unfortunately, the program was a disappointment, "It was a new town and I didn't know anybody. It was my first taste of freedom. They were trying to teach me to be independent in a town where I did not know anybody, I had never been anywhere but [hometown]. It didn't work. It was a hit [setup] from the beginning. I never understood why they put me there to begin with. I ended up running back home. Went back home and ran the streets." This individual tied the disappointment from failing in a heralded independent living program to his longer term inability to make a life for himself in the community.

In each of these cases, which represent all of the child welfare cases in the sample, the individual described a traumatic event as the centerpiece of his experience in the system. The event was portrayed as something over which the person had no control. After these events, these individuals gave up their hopes for making it on their own in a community setting.

These three individuals, originally placed out of the home as child welfare cases, seem to agree that they have been made victims of the system. However, there are differing sentiments about these services contributing to their eventual imprisonment. The individual previously describing the lack of independent living skill development, holds himself responsible for his imprisonment. "In prison because of bad decision-making. I wasn't going to let my brother get hurt, and a fight went too far. He was mad and I was mad, and he ended up freezin' to death. I would probably do it all over again."

The other individuals have a different view on the placement of responsibility for their time in prison. "\_\_\_\_\_ [a specific facility] made me very angry. It had the greatest impact on me coming to prison." "Being in juvenile facilities is very much related to me being in prison. This is why I speak of slavery today for a system which I am temporarily part of. Slavery as a juvenile, slavery as a resident of this prison."

When I shared the preliminary findings with one of these individuals in the process of the follow-up interviews, he supported the notion of the programs contributing to his imprisonment. "Especially what you go through. All this and it's not like it is supposed to be. It is like I went through all of this for nothin'. It makes you want to rebel."

### *Delinquent Youth*

The individuals placed out of their home for involvement in illegal behavior view the impact of juvenile services on their imprisonment very differently. They do not hold the system responsible for their circumstances, as a child or an adult. Their sense of having a personal choice in the matter is very strong. Although they often question the judgement behind their decisions, they accept personal responsibility for committing an illegal act. On occasion, some discredit the idea of blaming other things or



people for their personal situation. They are very willing to admit a preference for the allure of the street with little regard for the consequences of their behavior. "I did that on my own. I did it for the rush and the money." or "If I didn't get caught, I would get geeked up (high) and do it again."

These youth were very willing to point to the attraction of street life, as discussed earlier, as being very enticing to them. Unlike the child welfare individuals, they refused to identify the services and programs as leading to their involvement in the adult criminal justice system. One unique description portrays the issue as a matter of letting time pass. "I just recently figured out what I wanted to do. That be the problem with these cats, keepin' them out of trouble while they figure out what they want to do."

Others more directly credit the program and services they received while highlighting their personal responsibility for their situations. "Got the right thing, I just choose to do something else. 'Cause I remember everything I did in each program, but once you get out it comes down to that final test-are you gonna hang out with the same crowd or are you gonna get new friends and do the right thing!" "Had a lot to offer a person, if they took the time to understand. That there still leaves the ultimate decision, it still lies on them. If a person has in his mind that he gonna be a criminal, you ain't gonna do nothing about it." The delinquent youth admitted the attraction of the street life, chose not to blame the programs for their behavior, and highlighted the significance of personal responsibility.

This attitude about responsibility and decision-making was confirmed in a follow-up interview with a young man placed in the juvenile system as a delinquent. "Everybody knows the difference between right and wrong. To kill, rape, steal is wrong. If you place that problem with someone else, that is wrong. You know that is wrong. It is an excuse that allows you to act that way. Something in the past doesn't affect me. It doesn't make no sense [blaming someone/something else for your situation]."

Additionally, he supported the importance of surviving on the street as one of the crucial factors leading to additional trouble. "People don't know when to quit. Majority of people searching for things to get high off of, or a better life financially, not emotionally. Those things there, cause them to end up here. I knew it was

wrong to sell drugs, kill people. My thought process, this shit got to be done. Got to kill. This me or them." The impressions about the respective pathways from child welfare and juvenile justice systems to adult prison appear to be different for the child welfare youth and the delinquent youth.

## DISCUSSION

Child welfare cases were committed to the juvenile system because they were in need of care and protection. The individuals placed as child welfare cases in this study appear to be holding the system responsible for its dismal performance. In some cases, they attributed their imprisonment to poor treatment, and a violation of a commitment made by the system to care for them when they were young children.

On the other hand, the individuals placed in the system for their delinquent behavior are more likely to assume personal responsibility for their imprisonment. They appear to have accepted the placement in this system as some sort of retribution for their illegal behavior and this is linked to their decision to commit that behavior. Upon discharge from these programs, they continue to hold themselves responsible for these acts which they tend to attribute more to an inability to avoid the trappings of returning to street behavior rather than a result of the service programs within this system. It is interesting to note that the different views presented by these two groups are not apparent when they are critiquing the services in the juvenile justice system. They generally agree on a consistently critical point of view (Kapp, 1997).

This method of research seems to hold some promise for expanding the knowledge base about the impact of services on recipients. Some interesting notions about the progression to prison are forwarded by former clients of these systems. This method is useful for giving clients a voice in the evaluation of services. Additionally, some critical issues are presented within a context which is likely to be transferable to others settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Obviously, the findings need to be verified in additional and larger samples. Specifically by expanding the sample to include those that experienced services as a juvenile but did

not proceed to adult imprisonment. In any case, researchers, administrators, policy and direct service practitioners interested in the effect of these service systems are encouraged to support and conduct more studies that focus on the input of service recipients.

This study also highlighted some critical practice considerations. Practitioners in both the child welfare and juvenile justice system are aware of the need to provide and manage stable, safe placements for children which will hopefully lead them out of these systems and away from the constant developmental disruptions associated with moving from placement to placement. This study not only confirms those needs but provides a glimpse at some of the specific psycho social impacts associated with "growing up" in these settings. Some of the study participants propose that the instability in their lives as child had serious implications for their lives as an adult.

For the practitioners dealing with delinquent youth the findings may be not startling. These youth hold themselves accountable for their inability to resist the temptations presented by a street lifestyle and are accepting of the consequences. There is a clear notion of personal responsibility for the illegal behavior and eventual imprisonment. The practice challenge is to find ways to frame, present, and develop more attractive, positive alternatives. Given the inherently complex social and economic factors associated with diminishing the allure of the street and/or proposing acceptable alternatives such interventions should address the individual, family, and community levels of these client systems. A final consideration is the distinctively different points of view held by the formerly delinquent versus formerly child welfare youth. These differences may warrant separate treatment programs or at least programs capable of addressing these alternative views.

## CONCLUSION

Previous research raised questions about the special cultural, systemic, and service needs presented by high risk youth which may contribute to their eventual imprisonment as adults. Some insights provided by former recipients of the juvenile justice and child welfare system identified some potential factors. The life

history interviews provided valuable insights into these questions and should be considered by researchers interested in studying maltreatment, juvenile offending, and imprisonment. There seems to be different impressions of the pathway from the juvenile system to the adult system depending on the original reason for entering—child maltreatment versus illegal behavior. The differing methods of entry appear to have implications for the role of personal responsibility in the transition from the juvenile system to the adult system. Practitioners, researchers, and policy makers need to consider offending, and imprisonment. There seems to be different impressions of the pathway from the juvenile system to the adult system depending on the original reason for entry—child maltreatment versus illegal behavior. The differing methods of entry appear to have implications for the role of personal responsibility in this transition. Practitioners, researchers, and policy makers need to consider these differences and their ramifications as they deliver, study and advocate for the types of services provided to children in these two systems.

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