

JUST SIX
QUESTIONS

RESEARCH
SUMMARY



Child welfare adolescents & the youth justice system: Failing to respond effectively to crossover youth

Key Details

KEY WORDS

Crossover Youth, Child Welfare, Youth Criminal Justice

POPULATION GROUPS

Youth In Conflict with the Law
Youth In and Leaving Care

STEPPING UP THEMES

Health & Wellness
Strong, Supportive Friends & Families
Diversity, Social Inclusion & Safety

RESEARCH ORIGIN

Ontario

SOURCE

Academic

“A common thread running through the recommendations is the importance of improving communication and cooperation between CAS social workers, probation officers, other agencies, the courts and lawyers, and youth themselves. Rather than dividing responsibilities, appropriate case management focuses on a team effort where all involved are working towards a positive outcome for the community and youth” (p. 151).

1. What is the research about?

This research is about **crossover youth**, a term used to describe youth who are involved in both the child welfare system and the criminal justice system. Crossover youth tend to face many challenges, and the situations that result in their involvement with child welfare also lead to an increased likelihood that they will be involved with the criminal justice system. Currently, there is no accurate measure of how many crossover youth there are in Canada; this is problematic and reflects a lack of priority given to understanding the needs and outcomes for these youth.

2. Where did the research take place?

The research is based mostly upon American literature, where the bulk of research on crossover youth has occurred. The study also incorporates data collected in the form of interviews with a variety of justice partners (people working in the criminal justice system) in Ontario.

3. Who is this research about?

This research is about the experiences of crossover youth.

4. How was the research done?

This research is made up of a literature review of social science and legal literature on crossover youth, as well as 22 interviews with justice partners (as defined above). Interview participants were identified through snowball sampling (existing participants identified and recruited other people in their network who would be a good fit for the study). Interviews were conducted with five youth court judges, seven lawyers, two probation officers, five youth workers, and three mental health workers.

The interviews consisted of open-ended questions about crossover youth. Participants were asked to identify primary needs of youth, challenges, gaps and promising practices, suggestions for increased success in working with these youth, and communication protocols between agencies.

5. What are the key findings?

The literature identified that **youth involved in the child welfare system are far more likely to be involved in the justice system than their peers who are not in care.**

The literature identified **five factors** that contribute to youth in care becoming involved in the justice system, which were supported by the data from the interviews:

- a) parental maltreatment
- b) living in group homes
- c) substance use and mental health issues
- d) multiple moves within the child welfare system
- e) stricter sentencing towards youth in care

Prior involvement in the child welfare system is not always identified by the justice system, and this often results in a **lack of appropriate, caring, adult advocacy** in court. A **lack of communication and collaboration** between systems and a **lack of effective rehabilitation programming** for youth were also identified as barriers.

The literature and interviews identified **nine suggestions for improving outcomes** for crossover youth:

- a) early intervention
- b) better policies and practices for group homes
- c) increased advocacy by the child welfare system
- d) improved agency communication and collaboration
- e) conferencing between case managers and justice partners
- f) one specially qualified lawyer for proceedings in both systems
- g) joint pre-hearing conferences with all lawyers and agency representatives
- h) integrated court process
- i) increased youth involvement in decision-making

6. Why does it matter for youth work?

This research draws upon the existing literature, as well as input from experts who work with crossover youth on a daily basis, to determine what is and is not working in addressing the needs of these youth.

Existing initiatives are not sufficient in addressing **the unique needs of this population, which faces multiple, complex barriers to wellbeing.**

The suggestions for developing more appropriate and efficient services could result in **better outcomes for youth in Ontario.**



Bala, N., Finlay, J., De Filippis, R., Hunter, K. (2015). **Child welfare adolescents & the youth justice system: Failing to respond effectively to crossover youth.** *Canadian Criminal Law Review*, 19(1), 129-151.