

Probation Officers are found to develop treatment-oriented case plans for youth who have experienced trauma. However, researchers found there was a moderate percentage of unknown exposure to trauma and stressful life events, hence the need for trauma informed assessment instruments.

When youth involved in the criminal justice system have experienced trauma or stressful life events, probation officers are more often found to use therapeutic plans involving aspects of counselling rather than punitive case plans focusing on discipline.

Most youth (approx. 93%; Abram et al, 2004) involved in the justice system have experienced some type of trauma or stressful life event in their lifetime. These experiences create an elevated risk for criminal involvement in the justice system, which highlights the need for probation officers (POs) to assess for trauma and develop case plans that specifically address the stressful life events to help reduce recidivism.

Maschi & Schwalbe conducted this study to determine the level of PO knowledge of trauma and stressful life events their clients experience, and how they integrated that knowledge into their case plans. POs supervising youth who were members of the American Probation and Parole Association were invited to participate in the study. A total of 308 POs completed the survey, which included a series of questions ranging from the youths' psychosocial characteristics to the type of case plan approach used.

Despite the recognition, the way POs are identifying trauma is usually through unstructured processes. As a result some trauma goes unidentified, highlighting the need for formal tools. On average youth on the PO's caseloads had at least "one specialized mental health, substance abuse, or child welfare intervention prior to their most recent adjudication" (p. 25). POs reported 19% of youth experienced at least one type of trauma, with the most common being sexual assault. Additionally, evidence exists that 37%

of youths are using substances, but it is unclear if this is a coping mechanism to deal with trauma or not.

The majority of the POs reported having knowledge of their clients' history of trauma (86%), and were even more knowledgeable of stressful losses endured by youth on their caseload (91%). For example, POs are most knowledgeable about recent stressful life events that have occurred in a youth's life such as changes in their home address or changing schools. However, more historical stressful life events or trauma may not be identified through these informal assessment methods. Researchers uncovered there is a much higher rate of trauma in these youths' lives than what is identified. Thus important information is not always known to the PO when developing the case plan. The use of structured interview instruments will increase the likelihood of identifying stressful life events that require attention.

In regards to case plans, the researchers found that knowledge of trauma and stressful life events are associated with treatment oriented approaches in probation. The researchers noted that therapeutic approaches were used rather than punitive strategies with the goal of assisting youths, which is in keeping with evidence based approaches. Of importance, POs are aware of the negative impact that trauma and stressful life events may have on youths, and are actively identifying

and responding when developing their case management plans.

Conclusion: Researchers found that POs are strategically changing their probation approaches, to provide more support and counselling for youth in their caseload who have experienced trauma and stressful life events. However, they also found that not all trauma and stressful life events are identified by current practices. This supports the recommendation to use more structured trauma informed assessment tools to gain information, which will assist POs in developing effective evidence based case plans that support the youth and reduce the risk of recidivism.

Reference: Maschi, T., & Schwalbe, C. S. (2012). Unraveling Probation Officers' Practices with Youths with Histories of Trauma and Stressful Life Events. *Social Work Research, 36*(1), 21-30.

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