Addressing the needs crossover youth: What key professionals are saying

Matthew A. Walsh *, Jeremiah W. Jaggers

Indiana University School of Social Work, United States

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Crossover youth have complex needs and can create difficulty for service providers who have to both provide effective services to the youth but also work with and navigate a system outside of their own. Professionals from the child welfare system and the juvenile justice system have recognized the need to work together to help crossover youth. A successful collaboration can be extremely beneficial to all those involved but certain barriers must be overcome. This study uses secondary qualitative analysis to examine the opinions of key professionals in both systems as they came together to create action plans to address issues facing crossover youth in their individual counties. Researchers identify common themes and discuss the importance of collaboration among systems and recognizing individual county's stages of change.

© 2017 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Youth who are involved in both the child welfare and the juvenile justice systems present unique challenges for those involved in their treatment. This population is also increasingly becoming a focal point in many states. Over the last several years of recorded data, over 600,000 children are reported to be victims of maltreatment and over 400,000 children are in foster care (USDHHS, 2016). This is important because multiple studies suggests that maltreatment increases the likelihood of engaging in delinquency and also reoffending (Baglivio et al., 2014; Dannerbeck & Yan, 2011; Duke, Pettingell, McMorris, & Borowsky, 2010; Huang, Ryan, & Herz, 2012; Kingree, Phan, & Thomson, 2003). With these findings, it not surprising to see a call for more collaboration among the child welfare and juvenile justice systems (Huang et al., 2012). However, this collaboration can bring its own challenges to this already complicated work, as professionals with different backgrounds, education, and guidelines must work together and navigate each other's agencies and systems to achieve the common goal of providing the best services for the youth involved.

Before examining the working relationship of the service providers involved in working with youth engaged in both systems, it is important to discuss the youth themselves. Herz, Ryan, and Bilchik (2010) provide three terms found throughout the literature for describing this population. Crossover youth is the broadest term and applies to any youth who has experienced maltreatment and has engaged in delinquency regardless of whether the child welfare or the juvenile justice system is aware of it. Thus, crossover youth may not be formally involved in either

system. A subset of crossover youth is dually involved youth who are simultaneously receiving services from both the child welfare system and the juvenile justice system. The term dually adjudicated youth, a subset of dually involved youth, applies to only those youth who are currently adjudicated by both systems. There is some inconsistency among providers and researchers in using common terminology while discussing this population as is highlighted by the task force which provided the researchers with data for this study. The task force uses the terms "dual jurisdiction children" and "cross system youth". As the data that will be analyzed refers to identifying the population and prevention, the broader and more established term of crossover youth will be utilized throughout the paper.

There have been three ways states have opted to work with crossover youth: 1) concurrent jurisdiction, 2) on-hold jurisdiction, and 3) separate jurisdiction. Concurrent jurisdiction allows the youth to be under both the child welfare system and the juvenile justice system at the same time with the court deciding which agency is primarily responsible for the youth's care. If the crossover youth is under on-hold jurisdiction, his or her child welfare services are temporarily suspended until the juvenile justice jurisdiction is resolved. This typically applies to youth in state correction facilites. Finally, separate jurisdiction, only present in California, does not allow for simultaneous jurisdiction with the court system deciding which system would best serve the youth's needs (Herz et al., 2010). Concurrent is by far the more popular choice among states as 38 states use it. Two states use on-hold jurisdiction and nine use some form of hybrid of the two systems (Dunlap, 2006). Though theoretically concurrent jurisdiction allows the youth to have a wide and full range of services, this is not always the case. Breakdowns in communication and collaboration between the two systems can impede services and the youth can be forgotten with no agency claiming responsibility.

---

* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: matwalsh@iu.edu (M.A. Walsh).

Collaboration and communication between the child welfare and juvenile justice systems is vital in order to effectively implement concurrent jurisdiction. The benefits of multiple disciplines working together to benefit children involved in the child welfare system have been well documented (Haight, Bidwell, Marshall, & Khatiwoda, 2014; Lalayants & Epstein, 2005; Wolfteich & Loggins, 2007). In working together, professionals have witnessed improvements in service options and administration as well as prevention and identification of crossover youth in addition to better relationships among different professionals and a more holistic view of crossover youth and their families (Haight et al., 2014).

Collaboration is not always a smooth process and barriers to collaboration and effective communication have also been presented in the literature and are extremely relevant when discussing a collaboration between child welfare and juvenile justice systems. Barriers include issues with leadership, lack of clear roles, lack of communication, scheduling problems, and different philosophies, practices, and goals of team members (Lalayants, 2013). In addition to lack of communication, not sharing a common language or terminology can cause conflict among teams made up of multiple disciplines (Frost, Robinson, & Anning, 2005). Related to team members attitudes, Drabble (2010) found that, not surprisingly, negative perceptions of collaboration acts as a significant barrier. Team members can also feel tension within the team based on power or status differences (Frost et al., 2005; Magnuson, Patten, & Looysen, 2012) and this can occur whether power differentials are real or perceived (Salhani & Charles, 2007). Issues of mistrust between team members can be problematic as well (Horwath & Morrison, 2007). Conflict can also arise from team members having clashing personalities (Frost et al., 2005), different information, or different objectives (Frost & Robinson, 2007; Frost et al., 2005).

Understanding the need for effective communication and collaboration between systems and agencies working with crossover youth is important to both researchers as well as to the services providers and administrators charged with doing and overseeing this work. This may be especially true for social workers and the juvenile justice workers as they attempt to strengthen their relationship after a period where collaboration was a rare occurrence (Peters, 2011). Determining how professionals from child welfare and juvenile justice can best work together is a crucial step in improving both the services and delivery methods for crossover youth. One way to determine how best these different systems can work together is to obtain the opinions of those professionals tasked with this responsibility. However, this approach is underrepresented in the literature. As such, this study sought to use secondary data collected at a state wide symposium of those working with crossover youth to answer the following questions:

1) What goals do providers and key professionals view as vital in improving services and outcomes for crossover youth?
2) What methods and resources do providers and key professionals view as necessary to achieve their goals?

2. Methods

2.1. Data and sampling

The sample for this study consisted of 36 teams, each representing an individual county in a Midwestern state who attended a state wide symposium about crossover youth. The symposium was organized to support the mission of a state-wide special task force charged with improving the status of youth in the state. The task force established several priorities including identifying and addressing communication barriers between the systems involved, addressing issues related to service delivery, and improving coordination between the juvenile justice system and the child welfare system. Though both systems are administered at the state level, the task force also hoped to implement pilot programs on the county level based on this symposium. The underlying goal for each team was to re-think the issue of crossover youth in their own county and how they might take a leadership role in their community in order to address the poor outcomes associated with these youth.

Teams were represented by a variety of relevant professional including juvenile court judicial officers (Judge/Magistrate/Referee), the chief law enforcement officials in the county or county chief/supervisors of juvenile probation, local office Directors for the Department of Child Services, mental health treatment representatives from the county, and representatives from the local schools. Each individual was in a position to influence policy for their agency. Each team ranged in size from as low as three members to as many as ten in one case with a grand total of 187 participants making up the 36 teams.

The data used in this qualitative analysis comes from a form entitled the County Team Action Planning Forms. Task force representatives explained and administered this form to all 36 teams who completed it while at the symposium. The forms consisted of a table divided into five different categories using the following headings: 1) Strategies to Achieve Goals, 2) Timelines, Persons Responsible, 3) Resources Needed, 4) Indicators of Success & Evaluation Plan, 5) Date & Status or Date Completed. In addition to providing information under these categories, teams were also ask to provide a "goal/vision statement." Teams were asked to fill out the forms using four questions focusing on: 1) identification and definition of crossover youth, 2) identifying agencies best suited to serve them, 3) identifying barriers, and 4) creating action plans as a guide as they completed the County Team Action Planning Forms. The authors were not involved in any capacity during the creation or administration of these forms as this was initiated and completed by members of the task force. A third party made transcriptions from the handwritten forms completed at the symposium which were then provided to the researchers for analysis with IRB permission.

Documentation is a major form of data that qualitative researchers can use (Charmaz, 2014; Creswell, 2012). The forms used in this study are elicited documents as participants were asked to produce responses based on the task force's requests and as such can be used as a primary source of data (Charmaz, 2014). The research team opted to use these forms as the primary data source because, according to Charmaz (2014), elicited documents work best when participants have a stake in the proposed topics, experience in the relevant areas, and are able to adequately express themselves in writing. These are qualities that all team members who completed these forms should have possessed as key stake holders in either child welfare or juvenile justice.

2.2. Analytic strategy

Coding was broken up using four of the five pre-existing categories: 1) Strategies to Achieve Goals, 2) Resources Needed, 3) Indicators of Success & Evaluation Plan, 4) Date & Status or Date Completed. Due to the nature of its content, one category (Timelines, Persons Responsible) was excluded from the coding process. Entries were coded using elements found in grounded theory's approach to coding data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Charmaz, 2014). In the initial coding process, researchers used a line-by-line coding method which was very practical as each individual entry could be considered a line. Each researcher examined each entry in the four categories independently and then shared results to come to a consensus when differences occurred. For example, if a county entered three strategies to achieve goals, the three entries would be examined independently from each other by each researcher before each entry was assigned an agreed-upon code by the researches. This process was repeated for the other three categories to complete each form for every team/county. Some entries were more complex than others and combined several ideas within a single entry resulting in multiple codes to ensure each distinct and unique idea within that entry was represented by an appropriate code.

After the data was initially coded using the line-by-line approach, focus coding aided in organizing the codes into larger themes. To create these themes the researchers re-examined the list of codes together. Through this group process, some codes were combined to create larger,