

Crime Victims' Institute

College of Criminal Justice • Sam Houston State University

Director: Mary M. Breaux, Ph.D.



The Cycle of Child Maltreatment and Offending: Understanding and Preventing Juvenile Justice Involvement **Andia M. Azimi, Ph.D.**

Juvenile offending is a serious social problem in the United States, with important implications for the well-being of youth, families, and communities. The health and development of children are closely tied to the health of the broader society, and as such, youth involved in the juvenile justice system deserve both attention and effective intervention. Each year, approximately 200,000 youth are admitted into detention facilities, with an estimated 16,000 youth held on any given night (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2018; Lipsey et al., 2010). These figures represent a substantial portion of the youth population and raise critical questions about why so many young people encounter the justice system.

Detention itself is a pivotal event in the juvenile justice process and often serves as a turning point with long-term consequences. Rather than acting solely as a short-term intervention, detention is shown to increase the likelihood of more system involvement, negatively influence court outcomes, and contribute to lasting educational, psychological, and social disadvantages (Ryan et al., 2007). Youth who experience even brief periods of confinement are more likely to be formally processed, reoffend, and face barriers to future success (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2018). Therefore, detention may, in many cases, exacerbate rather than resolve underlying issues for youth.

Importantly, not all youth are equally at risk of juvenile justice involvement. Significant disparities exist based on race, socioeconomic status, and community context (Rovner, 2025). Youth of color are disproportionately represented in detention and incarceration, while youth from disadvantaged

socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to experience the environmental stressors associated with offending (Rovner, 2015; Sampson et al., 1997). These disparities reflect broader structural inequalities, including differential exposure to risk factors such as poverty, violence, and limited access to resources, as well as potential biases within the justice system itself.

Given these patterns, it is critical to understand the underlying factors that contribute to juvenile offending, particularly the role of child maltreatment. A large body of work highlights the strong connection between early experiences of abuse and neglect and later involvement in delinquent behavior (Ryan et al., 2007; Widom, 1989). Maltreatment can disrupt emotional development, impair social functioning, and increase exposure to high-risk environments, all of which contribute to the likelihood of offending (Dvir et al., 2014; Kim & Cicchetti, 2010). Insight into this interconnection is essential for the development of effective prevention and intervention strategies that address the root causes of delinquency rather than merely its symptoms.

The purpose of this report is to highlight the relationship between child maltreatment and juvenile offending, with a focus on how the criminal justice system and other social institutions can better serve youth. Specifically, the report explores the criminal justice response and its limitations; patterns of juvenile offending and its connection to child maltreatment; the role of family, school, and community influences; and the effectiveness of prevention and intervention strategies. By analyzing

these interconnected factors, this report aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of juvenile offending and to inform policies and practices that promote healthier outcomes for at-risk youth.

***Parens Patriae* and Criminal Justice Response**

The doctrine of *parens patriae* serves as a foundational principle in both child welfare and juvenile justice systems, granting the state authority to intervene on behalf of children when parents are unable or unwilling to provide adequate care. Under this doctrine, agencies such as Child Protective Services (CPS) and juvenile courts act in the role of a “parent of the nation,” with the goal of protecting the best interests of the child. Historically, the juvenile justice system was established on this principle, emphasizing rehabilitation, individualized treatment, and protection rather than punishment (Scott & Steinberg, 2008).

In practice, CPS is responsible for investigating allegations of abuse and neglect, assessing child safety, and coordinating services to support families or remove children from harmful environments when necessary. Juvenile courts, operating under *parens patriae*, are tasked with making decisions that balance accountability with the developmental needs of youth. This framework is particularly relevant for victimized youth, who often enter the justice system with significant trauma histories and complex needs (Ryan et al., 2007; Widom, 1989).

Despite its rehabilitative foundation, the juvenile justice system has increasingly adopted elements of a more punitive, adult-oriented model. This shift has led to greater use of detention, formal processing, and harsher sentencing practices, even for youth with histories of victimization (Ryan et al., 2007; Widom, 1989). As a result, the original intent of *parens patriae*—to act in the best interests of the child—has, in some cases, been overshadowed by a focus on public safety and accountability.

Maltreated youth are particularly vulnerable within this system, as their trauma-related behaviors, such as aggression, defiance, or impulsivity, may be

interpreted as criminal rather than symptomatic of underlying harm (Ford et al., 2007; Herz et al., 2012). This can result in deeper system involvement, including detention and incarceration, rather than access to therapeutic services. Research indicates that youth with victimization histories are significantly more likely to engage in delinquency and experience repeated justice system contact (Herz et al., 2012).

The way CPS and the juvenile justice system respond to maltreated youth has significant short- and long-term consequences. While intervention can provide necessary protection and access to services, system involvement can also produce unintended negative effects. For example, placement instability in child welfare systems and exposure to detention environments have been linked to increased behavioral problems, mental health challenges, and higher rates of recidivism (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2018; Rubin et al., 2007).

Formal processing within the juvenile justice system can also create a labeling effect, where youth internalize a delinquent identity, further reinforcing antisocial behavior (Becker, 1963). Detention has been associated with worse educational outcomes, disrupted social development, and reduced future opportunities (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2018). These consequences are especially concerning given that many justice-involved youth are already vulnerable due to prior maltreatment.

The tension between protection and punishment remains a central challenge in applying *parens patriae* within modern systems. While the doctrine emphasizes care and rehabilitation, current practices often reflect competing priorities, including public safety and resource limitations. To align more closely with its original intent, there is a growing emphasis on integrating trauma-informed care, diversion programs, and community-based interventions into both CPS and juvenile justice responses (Ford et al., 2007; Lipsey et al., 2010). Ultimately, effective application of *parens patriae* requires systems to move beyond punitive approaches and toward strategies addressing the root causes of behavior. By prioritizing rehabilitation,

stability, and support, child welfare and juvenile justice systems can better fulfill their role in promoting positive outcomes for victimized youth.

Epidemiology and Patterns of Juvenile Offending

Data indicate that more than 200,000 youth are admitted to detention facilities annually, with approximately 16,000 youth held in detention on any given night (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2018). These numbers highlight the continued prevalence of system involvement, particularly at key decision points such as pretrial detention. Even short periods of detention, averaging approximately 27 days, can have long-term consequences for youth, including increased likelihood of reoffending, mental health challenges, and educational disruption (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2018). Thus, while overall rates may be declining, the impact of system involvement remains substantial.

Beyond overall prevalence, racial disparities in the juvenile justice system are a serious concern. Black youth remain significantly more likely than their white peers to be incarcerated, despite declines in overall youth confinement; Black youth represent approximately 15% of the youth population, yet account for 46% of youth in placement (Rovner, 2025). Nationally, Black youth are over five times as likely as White youth to be held in juvenile facilities, and in 2023, they were 5.6 times more likely to be placed in custody. This disproportionality persists even after accounting for offense severity and prior history. Disparities are also evident at the state level, including in Texas. Black youth in Texas are incarcerated at a rate of 293 per 100,000, compared to 63 per 100,000 for White youth, reflecting a disparity ratio of more than four to one (Rovner, 2025). Similar patterns are observed across many states, with some reporting even higher levels of disproportionality (Hockenberry, 2022; Rovner, 2025). These findings indicate that racial disparities are not isolated, but rather systemic and widespread across jurisdictions.

In addition to racial disparities, socioeconomic and structural factors also play a substantial role in

juvenile offending. Youth living in disadvantaged neighborhoods characterized by concentrated poverty, social disorganization, and limited institutional resources are at greater risk of engaging in delinquent behavior (Sampson et al., 1997). These youth are more likely to experience increased police contact, higher rates of detention, and limited access to diversion or rehabilitative services (Ryan et al., 2007; Sampson et al., 1997). Research indicates that youth placed in detention are more likely to be formally charged, adjudicated, and incarcerated compared to similarly situated youth who remain in the community (Ryan et al., 2007). This creates a cumulative disadvantage, where early system contact increases the likelihood of deeper involvement in the justice system over time (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2018).

Demographic patterns in juvenile offending demonstrate that age is a central factor, with delinquent behavior typically peaking during mid-to-late adolescence before declining into adulthood. Gender differences are also well established, as males are significantly more likely to engage in delinquent and violent behavior (Moffitt, 1993; Piquero et al., 2003). Research has increasingly, however, highlighted that justice-involved girls often present with higher levels of trauma exposure, victimization, and mental health needs, suggesting important differences in pathways to offending (Baidawi et al., 2021). These findings underscore the importance of gender-responsive approaches within juvenile justice systems.

In terms of offense types, juveniles most commonly engage in property and status offenses, such as theft, vandalism, and truancy, which tend to be more prevalent among younger adolescents (Piquero et al., 2003). Violent offenses, while less frequent, carry greater societal impact and are more likely to result in formal justice system involvement. Developmental theories suggest that many forms of juvenile offending are adolescence-limited and decline as individuals mature, although a smaller group of youth engage in more persistent and serious antisocial behavior over time (Moffitt, 1993).

Linking Childhood Maltreatment to Juvenile Offending

It is not only child maltreatment exposure that is significant to shaping juvenile offending risk, but also the wider environment in which victimization during childhood takes place. Toxic relational environments can lead to children engaging in juvenile offending (Fox et al., 2015; Gold et al., 2011). Moreover, many families that encounter social services are vulnerable and have a history of system contact. These families are living in poverty and dealing with intergenerational trauma, mental health problems, and behavioral issues (Herz et al., 2012; Vidal et al., 2017). Therefore, for many youth who offend, their behavior is often a signal to deeper issues within society. These issues highlight the lack of social support and social capital in many communities across the nation—and help to explain why exposure to child maltreatment can be so devastating for some youth, especially if they are vulnerable in other family domains.

Exposure to child maltreatment produces immediate stress for a child and has the potential to leave lasting scars that affect later life outcomes. Research shows that youth who cannot escape from toxic environments, which increase child maltreatment risk, often adopt maladaptive coping strategies to deal with their stress (Wilson & Widom, 2010). These strategies include illicit drug use, alcohol use, prostitution, and running away from home, and they frequently lead youth to engage in subsequent offending (Agnew, 2006).

Juvenile offending is one of the most consistently occurring outcomes associated with child maltreatment (Evans & Burton, 2013; Fox et al., 2015; Stewart et al., 2008; Zhang et al., 2025). The scholarly literature has discussed several reasons why the connection between victimization and juvenile offending is so strong. When a child is maltreated, the effects of these experiences impact several different domains in their life. First, a large body of work shows that child maltreatment can operate through emotional mechanisms, especially emotional dysregulation (Kaçar-Başaran & Kızıltepe, 2025). These child victims may struggle to

regulate anger and stress, overreact to minor triggers, and develop poor coping strategies (Dvir et al., 2014), which can lead to later aggression and mental health issues (Kaçar-Başaran & Kızıltepe, 2025). Such aggression is frequently followed by physical violence, anger, hostility, and other antisocial behaviors (Maas et al., 2008; Zhang et al., 2025).

Second, peer influence and social environment are other important domains connected to the link between child maltreatment and juvenile offending. When a child is exposed to child maltreatment, it can bring about changes in their social world. These changes include feeling rejected by others and associating with deviant peers that reinforce delinquent behavior (Gifford-Smith et al., 2005; Kim & Cicchetti, 2010). Associating with deviant peers is one of the strongest predictors of juvenile offending, even when accounting for related factors (Gifford-Smith et al., 2005).

Third, exposure to maltreatment can also change how a child thinks and acts. Abuse and neglect disrupt cognitive development and social information processing (Alkhuba & Abdihaq, 2018). This can lead youth to develop antisocial thinking styles and maladaptive beliefs, which then can lead to offending behavior (Gonçalves et al., 2026). In addition, the consequences of poor decision-making and impulsivity among maltreated youth also mean that they are more likely to engage in other risk-taking behaviors. These behaviors include substance abuse, impulsivity, and violent acts that also increase the risk of juvenile offending (Özdemir Bişkin, 2024).

Although the link between child maltreatment and juvenile offending is particularly well-established, a large body of research demonstrates that protective factors and resilience lower the risk of negative outcomes among youth. Resilience theory emphasizes that positive adaptation can occur even when exposed to significant adversity (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005; Kim & Cicchetti, 2010). The presence of supportive systems in a child's life can buffer the negative effects of child maltreatment (Kim & Cicchetti, 2010). Supportive relationships with caregivers, teachers, and mentors provide critical emotional and social resources (Fergus &

Zimmerman, 2005). Strong attachment to school and association with prosocial peers can further decrease the likelihood of delinquent behavior by reinforcing conventional norms and reducing exposure to deviant influences (Catalano et al., 2004). Access to structured activities and safe environments also contributes to resilience by limiting opportunities for offending (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005).

Prevention Strategies: Early Identification and Screening for At-Risk Youth

Early identification matters because child maltreatment is strongly associated with later delinquency, and risk often clusters across family, school, peer, and behavioral domains rather than as a single isolated problem. Therefore, prevention strategies must acknowledge the role of trauma and victimization histories as well as the complexity of juvenile offending, and be able to target these key domains effectively. For instance, risk/needs assessments in juvenile justice research are tailored to the individual child. They are intended to identify factors linked to reoffending and guide individualized treatment rather than rely only on prior history or a professional's discretion (Ryan et al., 2007).

In practice, that means screening early for important risk factors, such as trauma exposure, traumatic stress symptoms, depression, suicidality, substance use, school disengagement, family instability, peer risk, and emerging antisocial behavior. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) recommends screening high-risk youth in the juvenile justice system, child welfare settings, shelters, and schools. The screenings should be brief, valid, and sensitive, and should be followed by a comprehensive assessment when red flags appear (SAMHSA, 2024).

Community & School-Based Prevention Programs

Community and school-based prevention programs target skill building and changing environments through social-emotional learning (SEL), anti-bullying initiatives, and trauma-informed education. SEL initiatives are shown to improve emotional

regulation, prosocial behavior, and academic outcomes while reducing conduct problems (Durlak et al., 2011). These programs benefit maltreated youth, who often exhibit deficits in emotional and social functioning. In addition, these initiatives reduce bullying and victimization by targeting empathy and conflict-resolution skills (Espelage et al., 2015). Anti-bullying programs are also important to prevention efforts. Research shows that these programs significantly reduce both bullying perpetration and victimization (Ttofi & Farrington, 2011). Trauma-informed educational approaches recognize the impact of adverse childhood experiences on student behavior and focus on supportive, non-punitive responses, which are related to reductions in disciplinary actions and improvements in emotional regulation and school engagement (Overstreet & Chafouleas, 2016).

Family-Centered Prevention Programs

Of all prevention strategies that target maltreated children at risk for delinquency, family-centered prevention programs are among the most effective (Eyberg et al., 2001; Lipsey et al., 2010). The effectiveness of these programs is based on the focus given to the primary context in which the maltreatment occurs. These approaches aim to improve parenting practices, strengthen family relationships, and increase supervision and support, thereby disrupting pathways from maltreatment to delinquency (Ryan et al., 2007). Family therapy models reduce recidivism and improve family functioning among high-risk youth. Interventions such as Parent-Child Interaction Therapy are effective for maltreated families, as they improve parent-child relationships and reduce abuse risk (Eyberg et al., 2001). Beyond formal interventions, family support networks also play a critical role by reducing caregiver stress and improving parenting capacity, thereby lowering the likelihood of delinquent behavior (Cohen & Wills, 1985).

Role of Child Protection and Welfare Systems

Child welfare systems play a key role in preventing the “crossover” or “dual system” youth phenomenon: youth involved in both welfare and

justice systems. Early intervention is essential, as maltreated youth are at significantly higher risk of engaging in delinquent behavior later in life (Widom, 1989). Moreover, child welfare systems provide case management and connect families to services such as mental health treatment, parenting programs, and substance use interventions. These services address the underlying risk factors associated with both maltreatment and delinquency (Herz et al., 2012). Placement decisions also play a crucial role. Stable foster or kinship care placements improve behavioral outcomes, whereas placement instability increases the likelihood of justice system involvement (Rubin et al., 2007). In recent years, there has been increased emphasis on trauma-informed approaches within child welfare, recognizing that addressing the psychological effects of maltreatment is essential for reducing externalizing behaviors and preventing offending (Conradi et al., 2011). Nevertheless, these systems face many challenges, including high caseloads, resource constraints, and systemic disparities, reducing the overall effectiveness.

Intervention Approaches

Intervention approaches for juvenile offenders with histories of child maltreatment should address the psychological consequences of trauma and the broader social contexts that contribute to delinquency. Trauma-informed interventions focus on recognizing and addressing the effects of adverse childhood experiences, with evidence demonstrating reductions in trauma symptoms and behavioral problems among justice-involved youth (Ford et al., 2007). Family-based interventions are among the most well-supported treatments for serious juvenile offenders, as they address multiple life areas that influence behavior and are consistently shown to reduce recidivism (Eyberg et al., 2001).

Policy Implications and Recommendations for Texas

Addressing the relationship between child maltreatment and juvenile offending requires comprehensive reform of juvenile justice practices. In Texas, continued efforts to move away from punitive approaches and toward rehabilitative,

community-based models are essential. Youth with histories of maltreatment are disproportionately represented in the justice system and often exhibit behaviors rooted in trauma rather than criminal intent. Research demonstrates that community-based interventions are more effective than incarceration in reducing recidivism and improving long-term outcomes (Lipsey et al., 2010).

Policy reforms should prioritize expanding diversion programs, limiting detention for nonviolent and low-risk youth, and increasing access to evidence-based treatments such as cognitive-behavioral therapy and family-based interventions. Strengthening practices within the Texas Juvenile Justice Department is particularly important to ensure that youth receive appropriate, rehabilitative services rather than punitive sanctions. Policies should mandate trauma-informed training for professionals across juvenile justice, child welfare, and educational systems. Routine trauma screening should also be implemented at key entry points, including schools, child welfare intake, and juvenile justice intake processes. Evidence suggests that trauma-informed systems improve behavioral outcomes, increase engagement in services, and reduce recidivism among at-risk youth (Ford et al., 2007).

In Texas, expanding access to early intervention programs—particularly in high-risk communities—should be a policy priority. Programs that promote social-emotional learning, strengthen family functioning, and provide early mental health support have been shown to significantly reduce delinquency and improve life outcomes. Economic research further demonstrates that early investments yield substantial long-term savings by reducing the need for costly interventions later in life (Heckman, 2006).

Community stakeholders, including schools, nonprofit organizations, and local agencies, also play a vital role. Developing mentorship programs, after-school initiatives, and family support services can strengthen protective factors and reduce risk. Schools should implement social-emotional learning programs, anti-bullying initiatives, and trauma-informed disciplinary practices to create supportive environments for vulnerable youth.

Overall, policy responses in Texas must emphasize prevention, integration, and trauma-informed care. By reforming juvenile justice practices, enhancing inter-agency collaboration, investing in early intervention, and supporting community-based efforts, policymakers can significantly reduce the impact of child maltreatment on juvenile offending and improve long-term outcomes for at-risk youth.

Conclusion

The relationship between child maltreatment and juvenile offending is complex, multifaceted, and deeply rooted in developmental, social, and structural processes. A substantial body of research demonstrates that youth who experience child maltreatment are at significantly greater risk of engaging in delinquent behavior later in life, a pattern often referred to as the “cycle of violence” (Widom, 1989). This relationship is not always direct, but is often mediated through a range of emotional, cognitive, and social mechanisms, including emotional dysregulation, cognitive distortions, exposure to deviant peer networks, and engagement in high-risk environments (Baidawi et al., 2021). At the same time, disparities in juvenile justice involvement highlight the broader systemic inequalities that shape both victimization and offending pathways (Rovner, 2025).

Given the far-reaching consequences of both child maltreatment and juvenile offending, prevention and intervention must be understood as critical public health priorities. Early identification of at-risk youth, investment in family-centered prevention, and the implementation of school- and community-based programs can significantly reduce the likelihood of justice system involvement (Ford et al., 2007). Evidence-based interventions, including trauma-informed care, cognitive-behavioral therapies, and family-based approaches, have demonstrated effectiveness in addressing the underlying causes of delinquency and promoting positive developmental outcomes (Eyberg et al., 2001). Importantly, these strategies not only improve individual well-being but also reduce long-term societal costs associated with crime, incarceration, and social services.

Breaking the cycle of victimization and offending requires multi-sectoral collaboration across systems, including child welfare, juvenile justice, education, mental health, and community organizations. No single system can effectively address the complex and overlapping needs of maltreated youth. Instead, coordinated, integrated approaches are necessary to ensure that youth receive comprehensive, trauma-informed, and developmentally appropriate support. Policymakers, practitioners, and community stakeholders must work together to prioritize prevention, reduce disparities, and create environments that foster resilience and opportunity. Through sustained collaboration and commitment to evidence-based practice, it is possible to disrupt the cycle of violence and promote healthier outcomes for future generations.

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Author Bio:

Andia M. Azimi, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor in the Department of Criminal Justice and Criminology at Sam Houston State University. Her research examines victimization, with a focus on children and adolescents. She is mainly interested in victimization that occurs early in life and its associated negative outcomes, especially those related to criminal offending.

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