

Staggering death rate for youth in Chicago juvenile justice system

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1 December 2005

A recent study published in the medical journal *Pediatrics* sheds new light on the tragic fate that confronts the impoverished and troubled youth who are caught up in the juvenile justice system in Chicago and its surrounding suburbs. After 10 years of research into the conditions of youth in Cook County's juvenile justice system, Dr. Linda Teplin of Northwestern University found that they are four times more likely to suffer an early violent death than their peers in the general population.

Illinois statutes define delinquency offenses as actions committed by someone younger than 17 years old that would be considered crimes if they had been committed by someone 17 or older. In 2003, 5,476 youth were being supervised by the Cook County Juvenile Probation Department, with at least 650 youth in detention centers, which have a daily intake of 20 children.

The researchers, who initially planned on analyzing the health needs of these youth, not their mortality rates, were staggered by the results. Far from lifting them out of an environment of poverty, neglect and violence, the juvenile justice system left these youth in the same miserable conditions and, in the end, contributed to premature death.

"Our first death occurred within the first year of the study, and people were shocked," said Teplin. "But as the deaths rose, I realized that there was a story to be told here because no one studies these kids.... [T]hey study recidivism in delinquent kids, but very few people look at the health needs of these kids."

According to Teplin, the study is not only the most comprehensive attempt in more than 60 years to pinpoint death rates in the juvenile justice system, but is also the first of its kind with regards to the data collected on young women. The picture painted for females is even grimmer, with female juveniles nearly eight times more likely to die before their peers in the general population.

"They [females] are probably most likely to be abused at home, neglected at home, maybe running away, facing a dismal life on the street, getting involved in the drug trade," Teplin speculated.

Starting in 1995, Teplin and her team followed 1,829 youths who were randomly sampled after passing through the intake department of the Cook County Juvenile Temporary Detention

Center. The sample's demographics (55 percent African-American, 28 percent Hispanic and approximately 16 percent white) underscore the disproportionately high rate of minority youth in the system.

"There's such a high percentage of minority children who wind up in criminal justice," said Teplin. "And we tend to think of other people being vulnerable to them. But the fact that they are so vulnerable themselves has not been sufficiently emphasized."

Another telling fact discovered by the study was that all the deaths were from external causes—95 percent of the deaths were the result of homicide or police intervention, mostly due to gunshot wounds. In comparison, most deaths among youths of the same age in the general population are attributed to accidents. The findings prompted recommendations that an investigation should be conducted into whether minority youth express suicidal intent by placing themselves at risk for homicide.

"These kids all died gruesome deaths...run over by a rival gang member, shot by a boyfriend," said Teplin. "I think we have become immune to the plight of the urban poor."

An earlier report co-authored by Dr. Teplin and presented to the American Medical Association in 2002 noted that nearly two thirds of males and nearly three quarters of females in the Cook County juvenile justice system suffered from psychiatric disorders, including major depressive, manic or suicidal episodes, as well as substance abuse and psychosis. The study found that disorders were highest among non-Hispanic whites.

Due to the gutting of public mental health facilities, the juvenile justice system has become the only alternative for many poor and minority youth with psychiatric disorders. The report stated that "Welfare reform has disrupted Medicaid benefits for millions of children who need treatment," as their parents were forced into low-paying jobs without health insurance. Welfare reform had led to the further impoverishment of many families and made poor children more likely to get entangled in the juvenile justice system.

Because of managed care, even families with health insurance in many cases did not have coverage to treat many disorders prevalent among delinquent youth, such as conduct disorder, ADHD and substance abuse disorders. Moreover, few child and

adolescent psychiatrists practice in poor and minority neighborhoods. “As the public health system reduces services,” the study noted, “youth with psychiatric disorders may increasingly fall through the cracks into the juvenile justice system.”

The juvenile justice system, however, is woefully ill equipped to provide adequate mental health services for large numbers of detainees, the study concluded. Furthermore, in recent years, Democratic and Republican politicians have waged a war against the very notion of “juvenile justice” and rehabilitation and have labeled troubled children as incorrigible “predators” who should be tried as adults and locked up in prison.

Illinois’ Juvenile Court Reform Act of 1998 is one such measure that imposes harsher prosecutions and penalties on youth. In the last decade, 500 children from the ages of 13 to 17 were jailed in the Illinois Department of Corrections Juvenile Division, where many may remain until they are 21.

The road to Cook County’s juvenile justice system is paved with poverty and misery for such children. While Hurricane Katrina exposed the enormous social inequality in New Orleans, similar, if not worse, conditions exist in Chicago, America’s third largest city.

Despite an allegedly “growing” economy, poverty in Chicago, like that of the whole US, has continuously risen. According to the Census Bureau, the poverty rate rose from 19.3 to 21.1 percent in Chicago during 2004 alone, as the number of officially poor increased by more than 47,000 to 571,727 people. The decades-long destruction of manufacturing jobs in particular has led to a 12 percent, or \$6,000, decline in the median income of families in the state of Illinois since 1999.

The situation for poverty-stricken families in Chicago has been further exacerbated as the decades-long assault on Chicago’s welfare programs draws to a close with the last of the massive public housing complexes—the Robert Taylor Homes—facing the wrecking ball. Once 28 towering buildings stretching along Chicago’s South State Street for 16 city blocks, the Robert Taylor Homes was the world’s largest public housing project upon completion in 1962 and a promise of humane and temporary housing for the low-income and minority workers who flooded into the city’s factories after World War II.

Ronald Reagan’s assault on social welfare programs—leading to an 87 percent cut in the Chicago Housing Authority’s budget—and the loss of tens of thousands of better-paying manufacturing jobs helped transform the projects into one of the poorest neighborhoods in the US. An estimated 95 percent of Robert Taylor’s 20,000 residents were unemployed and listed public assistance as their only source of income, with 40 percent of the households headed by a single female parent earning less than \$5,000 per year.

Just as they blamed welfare for creating various social ills, Democratic and Republican politicians alike denounced public

housing as a haven for lawlessness, teenage pregnancy and drug abuse and have demanded its destruction. With the legal backing of Congress, the CHA began demolition of the Robert Taylor Homes without even presenting a plan to relocate the more than 20,000 residents in decent, affordable housing. Though the recovered land was supposed to be used for a new mixed-income community—albeit for far fewer residents—the destruction of the projects led to a skyrocketing of property values in the area, effectively pricing out many former residents.

Poverty, homelessness, official neglect—these are the terrible social conditions that have condemned thousands of the Chicago’s most vulnerable youth to the juvenile justice system. And as the Cook County study showed, once entrapped in this system, they receive no help or hope, and instead, many go to an early grave.

The tragic outcome for these youth recalls a passage from Frederick Engels’s famous work, *The Conditions of the Working Class in England*, about how nineteenth century British capitalism devoured its human victims:

“When one individual inflicts bodily injury upon another such injury that death results, we call the deed manslaughter; when the assailant knew in advance that the injury would be fatal, we call his deed murder. But when society places hundreds of proletarians in such a position that they inevitably meet a too early and an unnatural death, one which is quite as much a death by violence as that by the sword or bullet; when it deprives thousands of the necessities of life, places them under conditions in which they cannot live—forces them, through the strong arm of the law, to remain in such conditions until that death ensues which is the inevitable consequence—knows that these thousands of victims must perish, and yet permits these conditions to remain, its deed is murder just as surely as the deed of the single individual....”



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