

# HEALING INVISIBLE WOUNDS: Why Investing in Trauma-Informed Care for Children Makes Sense

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## Introduction

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**Traumatic experiences affect brain development in children.**

### **Traumatic Brain Injury and Juvenile Justice**

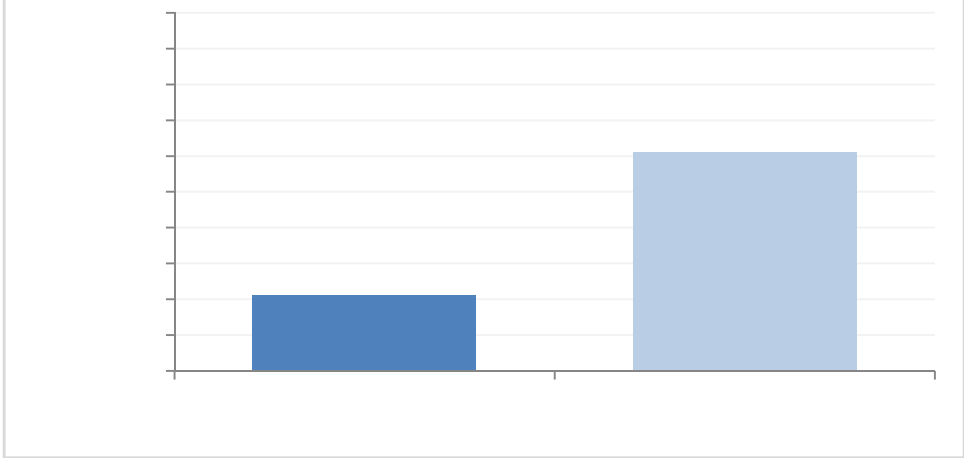
The Brain Injury Association of America describes traumatic brain injury (TBI) as “a blow or jolt to the head or a penetrating head injury that disrupts the function of the brain.”<sup>17</sup> The severity of TBI may range from mild (i.e. brief change in mental status) to severe (i.e. extended amnesia).<sup>18</sup> According to the Centers for Disease Control, children and adolescents are at greater risk for TBI than adults, with the highest risk ages being 0-4 years and 15-19 years, respectively.<sup>19</sup> The short and long-term consequences of TBI consist of physical (i.e. hearing, speech, vision, coordination), cognitive (i.e. perception, communication, reasoning, judgment), and behavioral (i.e. mood swings, anxiety, difficulty with emotional control and anger management) impairments.<sup>20</sup>

A traumatic brain injury during the period of brain development, which lasts well into a person’s 20s,<sup>21</sup> could disrupt the full development of decision-making skills and emotional controls that guide behavior. A traumatic brain injury combined with the impulsiveness of a youthful developing brain can increase the likelihood that a young person is involved in delinquent behavior. A large scale longitudinal research study in Finland found increased incidents of delinquency among youth who had experienced a traumatic brain injury prior to the age of 14.<sup>22</sup> Additionally, recent research examining youth currently incarcerated in juvenile detention facilities in Missouri found high prevalence rates of TBI.<sup>23</sup>

In addition to screening for psychological trauma, social agencies that come into contact with youth that need services should also test for physical trauma that may be contributing to delinquent behaviors.

**People of color are more likely to be victims of crime and violence.**

**White youth age 12-15 are less likely than African American youth to experience violence**



*Criminal Victimization in the United States, 2007*

*Statistical Tables*

**Children are rarely screened for trauma, especially in the juvenile justice system.**

**Children who experience trauma have disproportionate contact with the justice system.**

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*Journal of Child Sexual Abuse*

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*Clinical Child and Family Psychological Review*

**The current juvenile justice system does not meet the needs of youth who have experienced trauma.**

**Incarceration itself can be traumatic.**

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**Youth who spend time in juvenile facilities have poorer outcomes than youth who stay in the community.**

## Conclusions and Recommendations

**Improve in-system understanding and public awareness of the effects of childhood trauma.**

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**Improve reporting of and screening for trauma exposure.**

**Improve assessment of trauma exposure.**

**Provide targeted prevention and early intervention programs.**

**Provide services and treatment programs for children who have experienced trauma.**

**Avoid further traumatization within the justice system.**

**Consider trauma exposure when deciding sentencing and placement.**

**Invest in prevention and trauma-informed programs.**



## Acknowledgements

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*Criminal Victimization in the United States, 2007 Statistical Tables*

*Science.*

*Traumatic Brain Injury in the United States: Emergency Department Visits, Hospitalizations  
and Deaths 2002-2006*

*Years – Understanding and Preventing Teenage Brain Injury*

*Brain Injury: The Teenage*

*2006 Emerging Concepts Brief: What are the Implications of Adolescent Brain  
Development for Juvenile Justice?*

*Archives of Disease in Childhood*

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*Criminal Behaviour and Mental Health*

*Criminal Victimization in the United States, 2007 Statistical Tables*

*Criminal Victimization in the United States, 2007 Statistical Tables*

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2004)

*Child Physical and Sexual Abuse: Guidelines for Treatment (Revised Report: April 26,*