LEARNED HELPLESSNESS, CRIMINALIZATION, AND VICTIMIZATION OF VULNERABLE YOUTH

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Current justice policy and practice—as well as other social detainment systems—largely ignore youth developmental outcomes. In all its forms, institutionalization has the potential to inflict harm on the socio-emotional development of children it is intended to “help.” The all-too-common ongoing victimization and criminalization of vulnerable youth create and perpetuate a sense of “learned helplessness” that may lead to further detention, re-traumatization, and harm for children in the short term; and prevent healing and thriving over the long term.

WHAT IS “LEARNED HELPLESSNESS”?

“Learned helplessness” is the internalized perception of powerlessness that results from exposure to uncontrollable, continuous negative events. Youth experience learned helplessness when they move through multiple state-run detainment systems such as foster care, immigrant facilities, inpatient mental health care, and youth criminal legal systems, without receiving adequate support. When youth are shuffled back and forth between these systems as a consequence of already traumatic circumstances, such as violence, sexual exploitation, forced labor, neglect, abuse, parental absence, or human trafficking, they often fail to heal from trauma and instead feel powerless to their circumstance. As one young person described his/her experience of learned helplessness after moving through several institutional settings:

Me personally, I grew up around a lot of violence and my mom she always been abused and I went to foster care and I always got abused and I always ran away. I always had to fight. Me fighting always landed me in being incarcerated which always ended up in me fighting again, so being abused and in foster care and all that I landed here.
Anonymous

TO COMBAT LEARNED HELPLESSNESS, WE MUST PRACTICE “HUMANIZING JUSTICE.”

Youth crime must be reframed as a consequence rather than a cause of social ills. Restorative justice practices act on this knowledge by bringing victims and perpetrators together to create accountability and healing rather than punishment.

2. Make Community-Based Reentry a Policy Priority.
Youth should have access to services like educational and vocational training, family therapy, and housing options after interaction with detainment systems. Reintegration support is a key to stopping the cycle of trauma in both adolescence and into adulthood.

Interaction with detainment systems must be prevented in the first place by a strong social safety net. Social services should be provided collaboratively by government agencies and community actors in order to manage resources cost-effectively and create sustained, lasting culture change.

2 Interview conducted by Trejos-Castillo at a Texas Youth facility; study partially funded by a US Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Children, Youth and Families grant.