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Research Subcommittee Research Review

Research Summary: Zelechowski, A. D., Sharma, R., Beserra, K., Miguel, J. L., DeMarco, M., & Spinazzola, J. (2013). Traumatized youth in residential treatment settings: Prevalence, clinical presentation, treatment, and policy implications. *Journal of Family Violence*, 28(7), 639-652.

Overview – This article reviews the current understanding of the impact of trauma, treatment needs, and response to treatment for youth in residential settings by summarizing previously published studies on youth in residential care. This is important because youth in residential settings often have significant trauma histories which may affect their success in treatment.

Method – This article is a literature review.

Discussion – This article provides a lot of information about findings of various studies related to the characteristics of youth in residential care, particularly as it relates to trauma, including research suggesting that 50-70% of youth in residential treatment have been exposed to trauma, that youth in residential care have a higher average number of exposures to traumatic events than youth not in residential care, and that neglect is the most commonly occurring trauma, followed by physical abuse. It also summarizes trends in family history, including high rates of substance abuse and other risk factors (inappropriate discipline, parental arrest/incarceration, and parental unemployment) among parents of youth in residential care. It also discusses issues related to the proper psychiatric diagnoses for youth in care, particularly the difficulty in diagnosing a student with PTSD and the concern that PTSD does not capture the emotional and behavioral symptoms that traumatized youth often display, high risk behaviors often displayed by youth in residential treatment, particularly problematic sexual behavior.

The article then discusses the differential impact of residential treatment on traumatized youth, suggesting that the residential settings allow treatment professionals to witness a wider range of trauma related behaviors, but that the setting may re-traumatize the youth and as a result, staff need to have a good understanding of trauma informed care and the need to make sure youth know that staff can keep them safe.

Several treatment models are discussed, such as Attachment, Regulation, and Competency (ARC), the Sanctuary Model, Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavior Therapy (TF-CBT) and others. They argue that the focus of residential treatment for traumatized children should be safety and client's ability to cope and regulate. The article concludes with the policy implications, including the need for collaboration across child welfare agencies (child welfare, educational, judicial, mental health, and/or community organizations) to address the multiple issues traumatized youth in residential settings face and reduce the conflict between the objectives of these agencies and the need for a continuum of care to help address the broader concurrent needs of youth that will allow them long-term success, particularly with their transition back to the community.

Reviewer comments – This article provides a lot of information on the characteristics of youth in residential care as reflected in the published literature. It provides good citations to other articles that might be useful.

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