



## Heal the Invisible Wounds of Traumatized Youth in the Juvenile System

### ADDRESSING TRAUMA WILL REDUCE THE STRAIN ON TEXAS' JUVENILE JUSTICE SYSTEM

Traumatic events – including violence, neglect, abuse, threats, humiliation, and deprivation – have wreaked havoc on the development of many youth in the Texas juvenile justice system. Trauma in childhood often causes a youth's stress response to be over-reactive and dysfunctional, leading many youth to delinquent behavior. After a child has entered the juvenile justice system, past trauma continues to push the youth into deeper system involvement.

**Texas should implement a fully trauma-informed juvenile justice system.** Trauma-informed programs support rehabilitation and avoid re-traumatizing youth by adjusting all aspects of the service delivery system to respond to the vulnerabilities and triggers of traumatized youth. Texas should ensure its juvenile justice system offers trauma counseling by trained staff, while minimizing the use of seclusions (solitary confinement) and restraints (use of force).

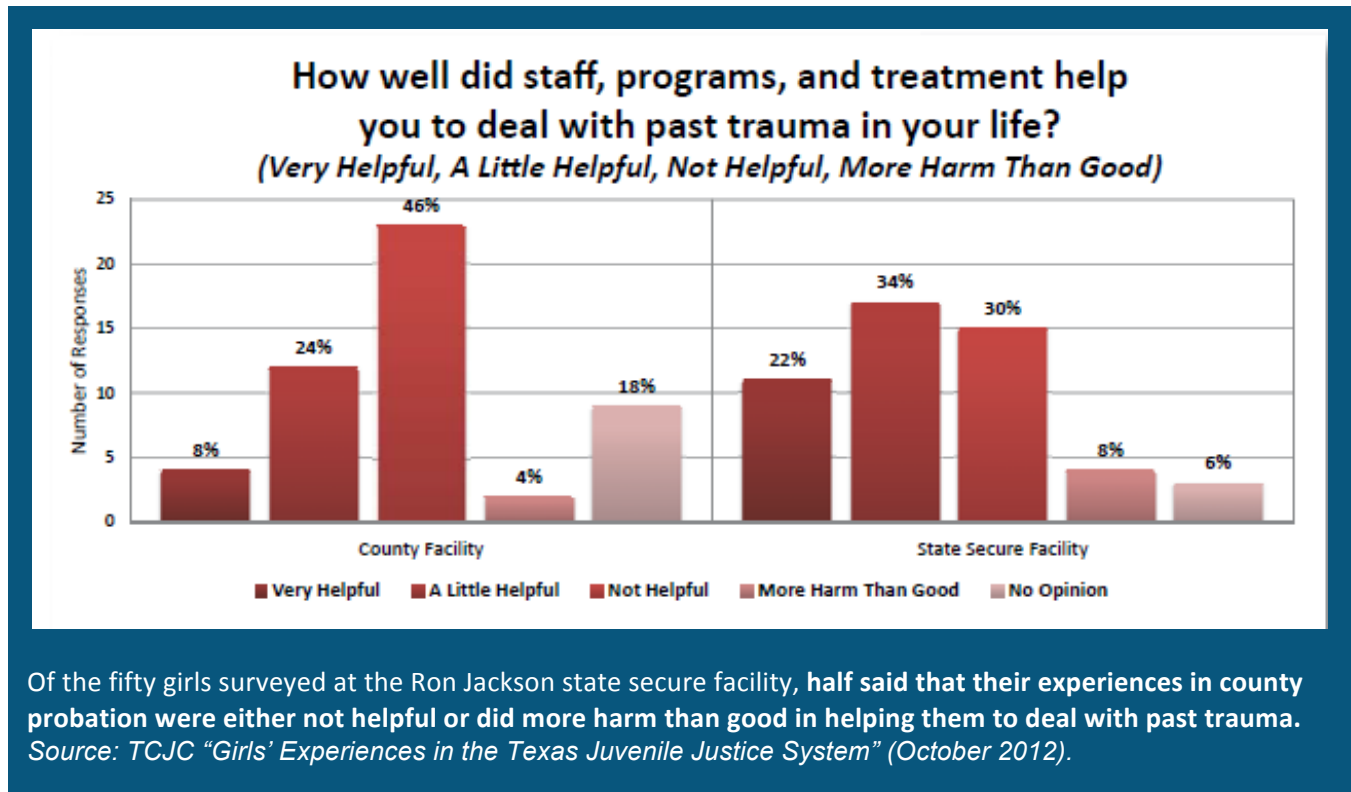
### KEY FACTS

- **Unaddressed trauma is placing enormous strain on the juvenile justice system and the youth in its care.**
  - » In Texas, over half of the youth referred to the juvenile justice system have previously experienced a significant traumatic event.<sup>1</sup>
  - » Recent research in Texas has confirmed the observations of practitioners and advocates that a youth's past experience with trauma is the largest predictor of the youth's assignment to increasingly serious secure placements.<sup>2</sup>
- **Texas' juvenile justice system is not adequately addressing the unique risks and needs of traumatized youth.**
  - » Fifty percent of girls surveyed at the Ron Jackson state secure facility said that their experiences in county probation were either not helpful or did more harm than good in helping them to deal with past trauma.<sup>3</sup>
  - » Trauma counseling is available to some youth in state secure facilities, but few local juvenile justice programs are currently able to offer sufficient support for traumatized youth.<sup>4</sup>
- **Seclusions and restraints, which are especially problematic for traumatized youth and youth with mental health concerns, are overused in many Texas juvenile facilities.**
  - » Texas youth experienced 5,333 physical restraints and 37,071 seclusions (thousands lasting longer than 24 hours) in county juvenile facilities in 2011.<sup>5</sup>
  - » Wide variation in policy and procedure among counties has led to widely different use of seclusions and restraints.<sup>6</sup>

*Solutions offered on reverse.*

## SOLUTIONS

- Do not allow seclusions longer than a few hours in Texas facilities except for assaults and similarly severe acts. Collect data from county facilities on which youth are placed in seclusion, what incident precipitated the seclusion, and how long each seclusion lasts. Require youth to complete therapeutic assignments whenever they are in seclusion for longer than fifteen minutes.
- Fund trauma-informed county initiatives, including diversion programs for traumatized youth to keep them out of facilities that may exacerbate their condition.
- Divert youth involved in prostitution from incarceration to therapeutic programs. These young women and men often need counseling support, medical care, and social services or they risk further victimization.



## References

<sup>1</sup> TCJC review of calendar year 2011 data provided by TJJD (April 2012).

<sup>2</sup> E. Espinosa “An Evaluation of the Influence of Gender and Mental Health Needs on Juvenile Justice System Processing” (2011).

<sup>3</sup> TCJC “Girls’ Experiences in the Texas Juvenile Justice System” (October 2012).

<sup>4</sup> See TJJD Program Registry. Conversations with county departments revealed insufficient resources for trauma programs.

<sup>5</sup> Facility registry data provided by TJJD (January 2012). The data collected by TJJD does not distinguish between short- and long-term seclusions; however, data provided by counties to the Texas Criminal Justice Coalition (TCJC) show that each year, thousands of seclusions last longer than 24 hours.

<sup>6</sup> Based on a TCJC review of seclusion and restraint policies provided by 13 counties. County lists of “major rule violations” that are grounds for 24-hour seclusion vary significantly; items range from “violation of school expectation” to “disrespectful behavior towards staff” to “assault.” (In adult Texas prisons, the “disrespectful attitude” discipline violation category was struck down by the *Ruiz* court. *503 F. Supp. 1265 (S.D. Tex. 1980)*) Some counties provide several levels of rule violations, with accompanying ranges of seclusion time; other counties use only a major level and a minor level of rule violation. Some counties allow youth to earn release from seclusion through good behavior; other counties use an automatic 24-hour period; some counties combine seclusion with therapeutic assignments.