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Child Policy Brief



Children in Georgia's Juvenile Justice System

Issue

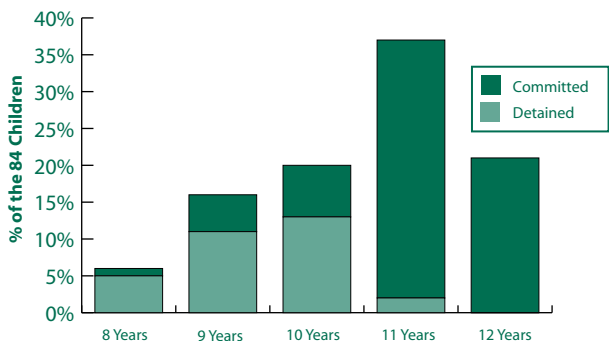
During the 2002 General Assembly, legislators introduced but failed to pass Senate Bill 76, which would have prohibited Georgia courts from committing children under age 13 to the Georgia Department of Juvenile Justice [DJJ] and would have prohibited DJJ from detaining children under age 11.

The Governor's Action Group for Safe Children asked the Child Policy Initiative at Georgia State University to investigate the case files of 84 children who would have been affected by the bill in 2001. These included 58 children under age 13 committed to DJJ and 26 children under age 11 detained by DJJ. They represent 1-2% of the approximately 4,600 children and youth committed and detained by DJJ annually.

Age

Most of the 84 children were 11 to 12 years old, although there were five 8-year-olds and thirteen 9-year-olds.

84 Children under age 13 in DJJ as of 7/1/01



Offenses

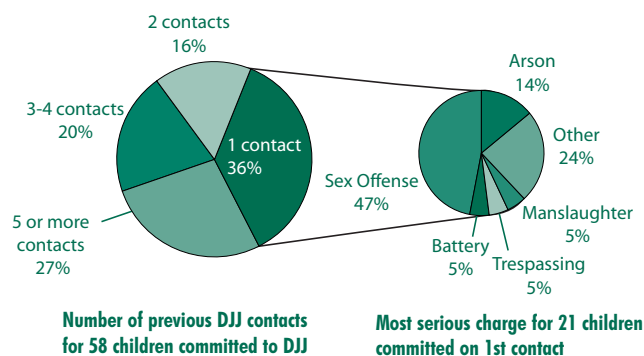
The 84 children were charged with 36 different offenses including:

- Violation of probation (21 children)
- Criminal trespass (15 children)
- Battery (14 children)
- Unruly (11 children)

47% of the children had 3 or more prior contacts with DJJ. One child had 15. Another had 12. Youths committed for minor offenses often had histories of more severe behavior.

Among the 58 children committed to DJJ, 21 were committed on first contact with the agency. The offenses of these children were typically more serious, with almost half committed for sexual offenses.

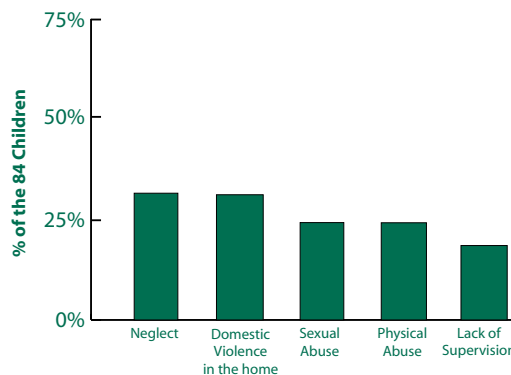
Sex Offenses Common Among Those Committed on 1st Contact



Child and Family Characteristics

A high percentage of the 84 children had witnessed violence and/or suffered abuse in their homes. Because these data are incomplete, it is likely that the group's actual exposure to violence and abuse was even higher.

Backgrounds of Abuse and Violence

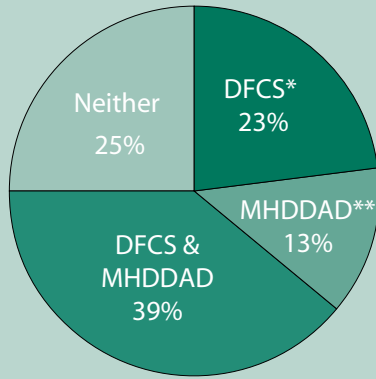


Children in Georgia's Juvenile Justice System

Given their histories of abuse and neglect, no one should be surprised that three quarters of the 84 children had prior involvement with public child-serving agencies.

Missed Opportunities for Intervention?

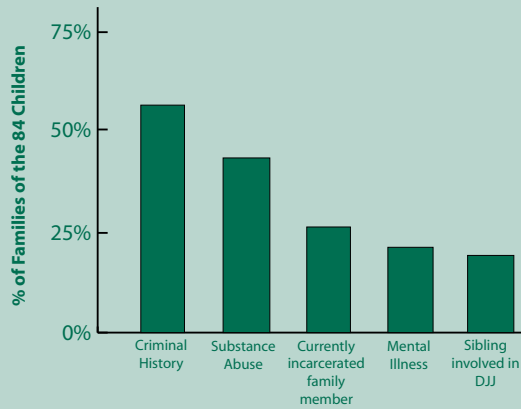
Involvement of the 84 children with state agencies



* Division of Family & Children Services
 **Division of Mental Health, Developmental Disabilities, and Addictive Diseases

Many of the 84 children come from families with histories of criminal activity, incarceration, substance abuse and/or mental illness. Children with family histories of criminal activity or substance abuse are at higher risk of becoming chronic offenders.

Troubled Families

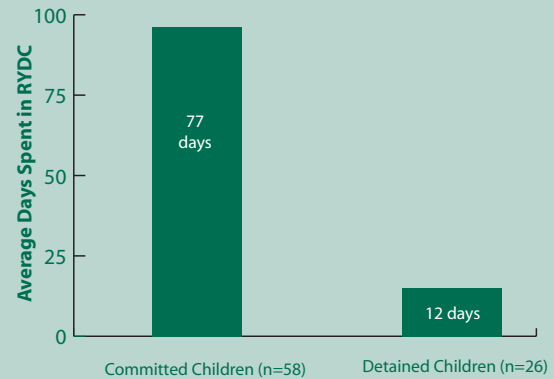


IQ scores were available for 47 of the 84 children in the study. The average of these scores was 83 – a full standard deviation below the national average of 100. Eight of the 47 children (17%) had IQ scores below 70, which is considered the cut-off point for mental retardation.

In short, the children under age 13 in Georgia's juvenile justice system are some of our most intellectually challenged, abused, neglected, and emotionally disturbed. They come disproportionately from some of our most troubled families. The files on these children are strikingly similar to those of the most seriously troubled children in the DFCS and MHDDAD caseloads, the only difference being that these children were caught committing an offense or series of offenses that landed them in the juvenile justice system.

Once in DJJ they moved among placements an average of five times. While many of these children are "awaiting treatment", 83% spent at least some time confined with much older youth in a Regional Youth Detention Center [RYDC]. These are 8- to 12-year-old emotionally disturbed and/or low IQ children confined for months away from home, in a detention center meant for teenagers.

Children spend 2 weeks to 2 months in RYDCs



Recommendation

Georgia should enact a statutory age restriction on detention and commitment. At the same time the State must develop adequate treatment and secure placements for these youth. In the absence of new alternatives, these children will be lost in a placement system that is ill-equipped to provide the higher level of security and treatment these children require.

The Child Policy Initiative conducted this research for the Governor's Action Group on Safe Children. For further information call Monica Herk at the Child Policy Initiative (404) 651-1540 or see <http://www.opb.state.ga.us/safekids/>.