

SNAPSHOT: TRAUMA AUDITS

NATIONAL COUNCIL OF JUVENILE AND FAMILY COURT JUDGES

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STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Approximately 3 million children in the United States were reported to child protective services in 2010 for at least one instance of abuse or neglect. Child abuse and neglect is a pervasive public health problem because of the association between exposure to early adversity, adoption of high-risk health behaviors as a coping mechanism, and early mortality (e.g., see the Adverse Childhood Experiences Study [ACES] at www.acestudy.org). The long-term and costly consequences of adverse childhood experiences emphasize the critical need for trauma-responsive prevention and intervention supports to promote the lifelong well-being of children and families.

Juvenile and Family Courts

Juvenile and family courts are uniquely positioned to help identify traumatized individuals and ensure provision of appropriate intervention services. Judges and trauma professionals alike are coming to understand that “informed” includes ensuring that environments, practices, and policies are designed to reduce unnecessary stress and potential stress reactions in those who have been trauma-exposed.

NCJFCJ’s Trauma Audits

Over the last year, NCJFCJ staff have created a framework to assist the field in creating a shared definition of what it means to be ‘trauma-responsive’ in courts.

NCJFCJ has developed tools to evaluate court environment, practices, policies, and court professionals’ attitudes/behaviors through a trauma-responsive lens. This process is termed a *trauma audit*. The goal of a trauma audit is to provide the courts with information on how to improve the experiences of the children and families they serve, as well as to assist courts to identify areas in which they can help to reduce the secondary trauma that professionals who work in this field often experience.

To date, seven trauma audits have been conducted. In collaboration with National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) consultants, NCJFCJ researchers have evaluated both rural and urban jurisdictions that have varying understanding of and response to trauma. Several more trauma audits are scheduled for the coming months.

WHAT DO WE KNOW?

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Why are trauma audits important?

Trauma audits can provide baseline data relating to how the court is currently performing, identifying both strengths and weaknesses of the court process from a trauma-responsive lens. The trauma audits also provide recommendations to the court that may help reduce the stress and trauma of the families served. Follow-up audits could also be conducted to assess change over time and, ultimately, to see if changes lead to better outcomes for families.

What do we know?

- Judges and courts need help defining what it means to be **trauma-responsive**.
- Child-friendly does not equal **trauma-responsive**.
- **Trauma-responsive** encompasses both the needs of the clients *and* court professionals.
- Small changes to practice, policy, or environment may **reduce** trauma triggers, **promote** engagement, and **support** healing.

NCJFCJ'S TRAUMA AUDITS

Trauma Audit Methodology

NCJFCJ researchers utilize a multi-method data collection process to assess factors related to trauma-responsive justice. Typically, trauma audits consist of a team of NCJFCJ researchers and/or consultants with expertise in trauma visiting a court for a two or three-day period. During this time, researchers collect quantitative and qualitative data on the overall court environment and current practice. Trauma audit activities may include, but are not limited to, focus groups with court professionals, surveys, courtroom observations, and court file review. Participating in such an audit highlights both the achievements and challenges an organization faces when becoming trauma-responsive.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Below is a list of the *most* common trends that emerged from data accumulated from the seven trauma audits conducted to date.

- *Court environment.* Many courts are *not* equipped with waiting rooms designated for victims or children. Courtrooms are not child friendly. Bilingual signage was missing or inconsistent.
- *Security.* Security presence in courthouses is intermittent.
- *Court professionals.* Most interactions between court staff and consumers are warm and respectful. However, knowledge and attitudes about trauma varied widely across court professionals.
- *Trauma identification and treatment.* Trauma screenings were found to be inconsistent. Many court professionals were unaware of available evidence-based (EB) practices.
- *Hearings.* For the most part, hearings were found to be timely, thorough, and well-organized. More efforts could have been made to solicit the perspective of youth and parents in the process.

For more information about trauma audits, please feel free to contact Dr. Shawn Marsh, the Chief Program Officer, Juvenile Law at NCJFCJ SMarsh@ncjfcj.org, or Dr. Alicia Summers, the Director of Research and Evaluation at NCJFCJ ASummers@ncjfcj.org. You can also request a trauma audit in your court by completing a Trauma Audit Request Form at this link: <http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/TraumaAuditRequest>

Research Snapshots highlight key elements of reports and projects that address the need for empirically-based research on systems change in the juvenile and family court system. For more information, please visit our website: www.ncjfcj.org

The mission of the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges is to provide all judges, courts, and related agencies involved with juvenile, family, and domestic violence cases with the knowledge and skills to improve the lives of families and children who seek justice.

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