

INTERVIEW WITH SHAY BILCHIK: Reforming Crossover Youth Policies: Saving Money and Lives

By Josh Caplan

Crossover youth are youth who were maltreated and involved in the child welfare system, but then commit a crime and “crossover” into the juvenile justice system. Shay Bilchik has devoted his career to gaining a better understanding of this population and informing policymakers at the local, state, and federal levels on how best to prevent youth from crossing over and treating those who do. Mr. Bilchik is the founder and director of the Center for Juvenile Justice Reform at the Georgetown Public Policy Institute (GPPI). Prior to joining Georgetown, he was the President and CEO of the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA). In 2001, 2004, 2005, and 2006, he was named among The NonProfit Times Power and Influence Top 50 for his work on child welfare issues. He was also previous the administrator of the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) in the US Department of Justice. He spoke with *The Review* about at-risk youth, the juvenile justice system, and options for reform.

**Georgetown Public Policy Review:
What is the Center for Juvenile Justice
Reform (CJJR), and what is your
primary focus?**

Shay Bilchik: The Center for Juvenile Justice Reform at Georgetown University, established in 2007, advances a balanced, multi-systems approach to reducing juvenile delinquency that promotes positive child and youth development, while also holding youth accountable. Housed at the Georgetown Public Policy Institute, the Center is in a unique position to provide strong and sustained national leadership in identifying and highlighting the research on policies and practices that work best to reduce delinquency and achieve better outcomes for this nation's children.

A particular focus of the Center's work is on youth known to both the child welfare and juvenile justice systems, also known as crossover youth. As Center director, I work closely with Georgetown's other policy centers, faculty, and departments in leading the Center's efforts.

GPPR: What are "crossover youth"?

SB: Crossover youth are youth who are dually involved with the child welfare and juvenile justice systems. This means that they either started their system involvement as children or youth who were abused and/or neglected and then became involved in delinquent behavior that resulted in their entry into the juvenile justice system, or started in the juvenile justice system and later were determined to be

abused and/or neglected and entered the child welfare system. This dual involvement challenges both systems to work in a more coordinated fashion, one that better meets the needs of this population.

**GPPR: Are the current policies for
crossover youth satisfactory?**

SB: This is a population of young people who have historically had their cases defaulted from one system to another. They have significant needs around mental health, substance abuse, and acting out behavior, as well as challenges in terms of a cluster of family issues. In light of these circumstances, it is not surprising that the system working initially with the child/youth and family are inclined to hand off the case management to the new system involved with the "case." It is this phenomenon that must change; adopting, instead, a joint or collective responsibility to meet the needs of these youth and their families.

**GPPR: What is the Crossover Youth
Practice Model?**

SB: In order to answer this question, it is necessary to also provide some background around the creation of the Crossover Youth Practice Model (CYPM). Casey Family Programs and the Center for Juvenile Justice Reform have partnered since 2007 to address the unique issues presented by crossover youth. The work undertaken in this partnership has been designed to better address the issues these youth present and meet their needs.

Based on a growing body of knowledge about these youth, their characteristics and the pathway that they follow, CJJR has developed a practice model that describes the specific practices that need to be in place within a jurisdiction in order to reduce the number of youth who crossover between the child welfare and juvenile justice systems, the number of youth entering and reentering care, and the length of stay in out of home care. Now being implemented in 42 counties across the country, the Crossover Youth Practice Model infuses into this work values and standards; evidence-based practices, policies and procedures; and quality assurance processes. It provides a template for how jurisdictions can immediately impact how they serve crossover youth and rapidly impact outcomes.

The practice model creates a nexus between research and the practice learning from the Juvenile Justice & Child Welfare Integration Breakthrough Series Collaborative conducted by CJJR in 2008 and 2009. It provides a mechanism whereby agencies strengthen their organizational structure and implement or improve practices that directly affect the outcomes for crossover youth. This includes but is not limited to the following practices: the creation of a process for identifying crossover youth at the point of crossing over, ensuring that workers are exchanging information in a timely manner, including families in all decision-making aspects of the case, ensuring that foster care bias is not occurring at

the point of detention or disposition, and maximizing the services utilized by each system to prevent crossover from occurring.

Participating in the practice model allows each site to create a seamless process from case opening to case closing that improves outcomes for crossover youth. Implementation of the model ensures that practices are consistent for all youth within a system and resources are shared between the systems to maximize their impact. The model emphasizes the importance of developing cross systems data capacity and the need to use good data to make program and policy decisions. Within the model there is a specific focus on the reduction of youth placed in congregate care facilities—specifically group homes and shelter care—and the increased utilization of families and the community as partners in case planning, policy development, and the building of system capacity.

GPPR: Are there fundamental differences in how states react to crossover youth? Can you categorize the types of responses?

SB: The primary difference in the way states or local jurisdictions react to crossover youth is whether they have policies in place that require joint or integrated case management for these youth and their families. While the default phenomenon that I referenced earlier is fairly common, there are a number of jurisdictions that require their staff to maintain case assessment, planning, and management responsibility—and to share that

responsibility, as appropriate, with their counterparts in the other system.

GPPR: There is a rising consensus in the juvenile justice field that a multi-systems approach to care is key to preventing and rehabilitating crossover youth. What does a multi-systems approach entail? Are there barriers to preventing groups like schools, courts, and welfare organizations from working with each other now?

SB: There is a growing recognition that systems must more effectively work together to better meet the needs of youth who are involved in multiple systems. This includes child welfare and juvenile justice, as well as education, mental health, and substance abuse. This involves building a common vision for how these systems will work together and why it is important to do so, along with a concerted effort to break down the barriers that interfere with this more collaborative approach taking hold. This entails sharing information across systems in an appropriate manner and a commitment to joint case assessment, planning, and management. Confidentiality laws, organizational culture, and differences in mission all can act as barriers to achieving this more collaborative approach. The Crossover Youth Practice Model suggests a path to address and overcome these barriers and better serve the needs of crossover youth.

GPPR: It seems that the current policy fight is between being “tough on crime” and being “right on crime.” Do the current politics favor policies

that punish more than ones that rehabilitate?

SB: Current policies favor a “smart on crime” approach; one that balances prevention with intervention and contemplates the effective use of evidence-based practices to meet the needs of youth involved in, or at risk of becoming involved in, the juvenile justice system. Seen as cost effective, this type of approach consists of the use of validated assessment instruments designed to determine the risk for offending and treatment needs. It also includes the effective matching of those assessments with the correct program or treatment and the measurement of the effect of those interventions as compared to what our science tells us they should be able to achieve. This also leads directly to program and system improvement. This amounts to an evidence-based operating platform that will result in lower recidivism rates and other positive outcomes for our youth, including better educational and behavioral health outcomes. The coming together of the political right and left around this operating platform is at the heart of this “smart on crime” approach.

GPPR: What should the role of parents be? Should there be a focus on parental involvement, and if so, to what extent? In the US, we largely believe that parents both want and know what is best for their children, so they are usually given exceptional discretion in making decisions. Should parental input be optimized or minimized?

SB: Parents and family play an essential role in meeting the needs of youth known to either the child welfare or juvenile justice system, or both. While some look at families as the root of the problem these young people face, they are actually at the heart of meeting those needs. When we look at the most effective programs in reducing delinquency and achieving better outcomes for our most challenged and challenging youth, they are those that rely heavily on the role of families. Although they may include mental health, substance abuse treatment, and general counseling, they also include family strengthening in an effort to build a strong infrastructure of support for the youth once the system is no longer formally involved in their lives. This requires a strength-based approach that recognizes that every family brings skills and expertise around the needs of their children—with family being defined as their immediate caregivers along with extended family members. For families struggling through the situations that brought them into contact with the child welfare and juvenile justice systems, it is hoped that that leads to their more active role in designing and acting upon the interventions designed to improve their children's life outcomes. In this regard, I would hope that we constantly look for ways to optimize the role of families in the work that we do on behalf of our system-involved youth.

GPPR: As we are politically focused on deficit reductions and cost cuttings, is there a fiscal argument

for changing the way we approach crossover youth?

SB: As noted above, changing the way we work with crossover youth has the potential to achieve better outcomes and be more cost-effective. The work that we have undertaken at CJJR with our Crossover Youth Practice Model has preliminarily been shown to change the way systems behave as well as the outcomes experienced by crossover youth—including improving permanency outcomes and reducing recidivism. All of this speaks to the fiscal argument referenced in your question.

GPPR: What is on the horizon for research on crossover youth? Are there notable research projects that are coming out that people should look for?

SB: There has been a growing body of research around crossover youth and issues related to their well-being. Research studies recently released concerning crossover youth in Washington State and Missouri are part of this research, as are studies exploring the disproportionate representation of girls and youth of color in the crossover population. The data referenced in one of my earlier answers on the Crossover Youth Practice Model reflects the largest study ever undertaken focusing on an intervention designed to reduce crossing over and achieve better outcomes for youth who have crossed over. This research is designed to better understand both the characteristics of crossover youth and the most effective approaches toward prevention and intervention.