Juvenile Justice Vision 20/20 June 2016 Training Event
Youth Mental Health in the Real World: Trends, Risk Factors, and Effects
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Presented by: Dr. Robin Smith-Colton and Kolby Cole

In this seminar presentation, Dr. Robin Smith-Colton and Kolby Cole explored a broad overview of mental health issues in juveniles. The speakers defined mental health as how people respond to the events in their lives. They identified mental health as existing on a continuum and explained that it applies to everyone, regardless of age. There are many different models and frameworks to help understand the challenges surrounding mental health. The biopsychosocial model examines how the biological, social, and psychological factors intersect to influence an individual's mental health. This model is especially relevant to juveniles, as adolescence is a crucial time of change socially, biologically, and cognitively.

Dr. Smith-Colton and Mr. Cole examined some of the more prevalent mental health issues facing juveniles. One such issue, stress, can cause adolescents to be irritable, depressed, or anxious. Recent studies have shown that there is a direct correlation between stress and the amount of time someone spends online. Many coping mechanisms are sedentary activities, which research shows may not release tension in a positive way. Anxiety is another common mental health issue among youth. One study found that anxiety manifests more commonly in older youths and those living at or below poverty. Additionally, 11% of youth have been diagnosed with ADHD. Symptoms of ADHD present differently in male and female adolescents.

Another form of mental health issues common in youth is found in eating behaviors. Eating disorder awareness is fairly common, but other eating behaviors can indicate mental health problems. 34% of youth are considered overweight, while 19% are considered obese. Unhealthy eating behaviors, whether someone is over- or under-weight, often leads to bullying and isolation which can greatly affect that child's mental health.

In addition, trauma is very complex and affects children on many levels. Those who experience trauma prior to age four often have numerous issues that can impact the rest of their lives. Children who are exposed to traumatic experiences can have delays in brain development, language, and emotional maturity. If no treatment and supports are provided, youth can continue to experience trauma and many have difficultly interacting with others, struggle with depression, and are at a higher risk for suicide.

The presenters identified two types of traumatic experiences: acute and chronic. Acute trauma is generally related to a specific event or encounter, whereas chronic trauma is often repetitive or systematic. Youth who have experienced trauma tend to engage in more risk-taking behaviors, exhibit chronic absenteeism, and attempt suicide at a higher rate.

Dr. Smith-Colton and Mr. Cole spoke on the impact of technology on youth mental health. Studies show that 11-18 year olds are exposed to over eleven hours of electronic media each day. Much of this exposure comes through social media. This interaction can affect how youth see themselves based on the way in which others respond to them online. Social media use has been

linked to sleep disturbances, lower academic achievement and internet addictions among vulnerable populations. Social media increases competitiveness for physical qualities. There is a need to constantly update what is posted and this can create a stimulus addiction. Social networking sites often effect family interactions and in-person relationships. Additionally, problem-solving abilities have been shown to suffer through the use of social networking sites. For instance, many youth are using the internet to "resolve" conflict instead of handling issues in the appropriate space (i.e. school).

There are many other effects of the increase of technology use on mental health. Violent video games can cause some kids to exhibit "flashbacks" and trauma-like symptoms. Cyber-bullying is a common problem because the bully has a feeling of anonymity and there is a faceless victim. However, social media does have positive purposes as well. People can stay in touch over long distances and it increases access to previously inaccessible groups, like support groups. It can also be used to connect people who share a common interest or cause.

Though many youth who are susceptible to these issues have a variety of difficulties, some are choosing to avoid risky behaviors and making plans for the future. Each kid is unique and must be handled as an individual. Often, the family system is crucial to building a positive identity. Relationships with mentors, coaches, family members, or other adult figures can create a positive impact on youth.

Dr. Smith-Colton and Mr. Cole stressed the importance of making various systems accessible to youth. There are some people who do not have access to the systems of care. Collaboration among agencies and organizations is encouraged because many of the systems cannot operate in isolation. It is important to work together to provide for the youth in the community as much as possible.