Incorporating Family Centered Practice in Youth Service Systems: Building a More Effective Juvenile Justice Field
by: Shay Bilchik, Center for Juvenile Justice Reform and Systems Integration, Georgetown University

It is a headline found all too frequently in one of our major newspapers or on the news wire: “Juveniles Alleged to be Mistreated While in Care of Youth Authorities.” Most recently we heard this news about the Texas Youth Commission where it is alleged that officials charged with the rehabilitation of delinquent youth in their care, instead were involved in their abuse. In Florida it was a youth dying in custody while in a Boot Camp. Los Angeles County is working hard to comply with a memorandum of agreement with the U.S. Department of Justice that addresses problems in its facilities housing delinquent youth, including inadequate supervision, education services, and behavioral health treatment. As examples of a broader range of issues related to juvenile delinquency, the suburbs outside of the District of Columbia are dealing with increasing levels of gang violence, and communities across the country are grappling with the over representation of children of color in their juvenile justice systems. What every one of these situations has in common is that they were preventable—we have the knowledge about effective policy and practice to achieve much better outcomes.

Indeed, the research on what works to prevent delinquency and to intervene effectively when it does occur has developed into a rich and robust body of knowledge. This is true both for how to reduce gang violence and more effectively care for delinquent youth. So why do so many communities struggle with these issues? Why aren’t we doing better? The path we have followed in recent years provides an insight into the answer to those questions—it is one we follow all too frequently in relation to juvenile delinquency and other important societal issues.

A dramatic increase in juvenile crime from the mid 1980’s through the early 1990’s drew increased public attention and a demand that public officials do something to address the problem. There was a fear of what pundits called the generation of the “juvenile super predator.” This fear, although not founded on any credible research identifying whether there had been a fundamental change in the characteristics of this generation of young people, led to the advancing of more punitive/accountability based measures. Fortunately, national leadership emerged calling for a balanced approach to attack the problems of juvenile delinquency. This approach gave a higher priority to preventive efforts and promoted the use of less restrictive and more community based rehabilitative practices. It also embraced a multi-systems strategy proven by research to be effective when implemented across systems involved in providing health, education, child welfare, housing, family strengthening, and social and youth development services. The result was the beginning of a “sea change” in juvenile justice practice and a dramatic downturn in juvenile crime.

As most readers of this article know, however, it was at this time when our tendency to lose focus and move on to the other pressing issues of the day took hold. Despite experiencing a large decrease in juvenile delinquency in the late 1990’s, continuing into the first few years of the new decade, the nation’s leadership “drifted” from these core principles, reducing investments in proven strategies. The federal government in particular receded from its strong leadership role, with a drastic reduction in funding support for its leadership office on these issues: the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention in the U.S. Department of Justice. The resulting lack of a strong, consistent voice on best practices in juvenile justice has in part led to this “drift.” The result has been, at least in part, a recent spike of juvenile delinquency as reported by local law enforcement agencies. We need to, and can correct this drift.

As I have watched us divert our attention over the last several years, I have become convinced that there is an opportunity to refocus our efforts and capitalize on the knowledge now in hand to produce better outcomes for our most challenged and challenging children and youth. It is where I have decided to place all of my energy and effort in the years to come. Preparing to leave my position as President of the Child Welfare League of America this past February, I made the decision to tackle these issues through the creation of a Center for Juvenile Justice Reform and Systems Integration at Georgetown University. Working with my colleagues at the Georgetown Public Policy Institute, we will provide strong and sustained national leadership in focusing on what research and practice tells us works best to reduce delinquency. The Center will accomplish this through a variety of activities; primarily a groundbreaking new program of intensive study designed for local and state public agency leaders—and multi-disciplinary teams of those leaders—responsible for policy and practice development and implementation across the three branches of government in their jurisdictions. Along with the release of a series of “white papers” and sponsorship of symposia on issues of critical importance, the Center will utilize cutting edge technology to build on its program of intensive study to continually lift the field to higher levels of performance.

The new Center is in a unique position to achieve this goal. It is being housed in one of the most prestigious universities in the country and will have access to the country’s most influential voices in the juvenile justice arena from across the country. The Center will focus the nation’s juvenile justice and related systems of care on the key principles embodied in an evidence-based juvenile justice reform agenda, utilizing a multi-systems approach. These include:

- an effective balance of prevention and intervention services;
- an individualized system of justice for youth;
- implementation of proven and effective practices;
I was young, but I can recall thinking that life was going to happen and then it does? Have you ever had the feeling that something going to die? It was a fairly warm day, and I was outside honing my skills on my new found hobby: basketball. When I had defeated a little girl in the neighborhood, she was angry about it. She told me, “That’s why your Grandmother is going to die. I saw the ambulance in front of your house.” I thought surely she was just angry. Besides I didn’t hear an ambulance, but I figured I’d better check just in case. As I rounded the corner I could hear a big commotion. I saw my grandmother being lifted into the ambulance. My face grew hot with tears. I thought my heart was going to leap out of my chest. Was it true? Is Grandma going to die?

Have you ever had the feeling that something bad was going to happen and then it does? I was young, but I can recall thinking that life was going to be different from now on. Have you ever been in a place where you felt so alone and helpless? Well, if you are like me you have. If you are like me, you understand what it is like to go from a time of complete peace in your life to having it tossed about, seemingly with no regard for the detriment that it leaves. That is what I call a storm.

Storms can occur suddenly without sufficient warning so you don’t have time to brace yourself. Webster’s New World Dictionary defines a storm as a sudden strong attack on a fortified place. If you are reading this book and you are like me, having grown up in the custody of the Department of Social Services (DSS), then you should know you are in that fortified place. Please understand that I am a work in progress. I am not at all where I would like to be. But I am certainly no where near where I used to be. Have you ever noticed that before a big storm hits the air is usually still? I could even call it a state of peace. That’s pretty common. At least it was the case for me. Life could not have been better for me.

I lived in a home that was jammed packed with relatives. My grandparents, my three older siblings, my aunt and her three children, my uncle, my three cousins and I all lived in the one house in the Lincoln Park projects. It never seemed as crowded as it should have considering the number of people that lived there. We had so much fun. I can remember all us children playing in the neighborhood with other kids until the street lights came on. The Saturday night parties were the best. It was just like you see on TV. My aunts and older cousins would have all their friends over playing cards and listening to music. We children would be in the back room playing games. Sometimes I could hear my aunt yelling for her son to come and dance for her company.

Sunday dinners were the pinnacle of family gatherings. My grandmother would start dinner before church on Sunday morning, and it would cook the entire time we were at church. This in itself was amazing because we were often in church from nine in the morning until three in the afternoon. Yes, that is a long time! Fried chicken, black-eyed peas, macaroni and cheese, collard greens, yeast rolls, you name it, it would be on the dinner table on Sunday. For that matter, sometimes during the week!

Surviving the Storm
by: Julia Charles

Who would have thought that the skinny kid from Virginia would turn out this way? I guess it all started in the Lincoln Park Housing Projects in Portsmouth, Virginia. Life was great. I had my two older brothers and my older sister there. I was the baby and my grandmother and grandfather never let the rest of the family forget it.

Beyond providing information on these key principles, the Center will also provide ongoing and detailed guidance and instruction on how to implement this reform agenda through the adoption of sound policy and practice. Outreach to the field has confirmed a strong need and demand for this new resource and the stronger leaders in the juvenile justice field the Center will help develop. The challenge taken on by the Center is significant, but the upside associated with its creation is also great—a stronger field with a resource available to it that will never lose its focus, or its leadership commitment to the children and youth served by the juvenile justice and related systems of care. The result: lower rates of delinquency; healthier children, youth, and families; and more equitable and fair systems of justice in this nation’s communities.

For more information on the Center for Juvenile Justice Reform and Systems Integration at Georgetown University, contact its Director, Shay Bilchik, at scb45@georgetown.edu

About the Author
Shay Bilchik, J.D. is Director of the Center for Juvenile Justice Reform and Systems Integration at Georgetown University. His transition to this position comes after serving as President and CEO of the Child Welfare League of America from 2000-2007, and prior to serving as Administrator of the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) in the U.S. Department of Justice. During these transitions Mr. Bilchik has been involved in drafting key juvenile justice and child abuse legislative proposals, as well as authoring many articles and opinion pieces on children’s issues. One of the basic tenets of his work has been the need for a multi-systems approach in supporting our most vulnerable children, youth and families. Mr. Bilchik has received numerous awards for his advocacy and always carries the message that children must be made a priority in our society.