

# Preface

Over the last century, society has made considerable progress in how it responds to juvenile offenders. Prior to the twentieth century, children and adolescents who committed illegal acts were punished in a manner similar to that of adults, with little regard given to how their age or developmental immaturity may be impacting their misbehaviors. However, as child advocates and various professionals became increasingly vocal in the mid- to late 1800s regarding the need to separate juvenile offenders from adult criminals, policy-makers began to understand that children and adolescents were emotionally, developmentally, and cognitively different from that of adults. The most obvious result of this understanding was the establishment in 1899 of the first juvenile court in Cook County, Illinois, with this juvenile justice system being a distinctly different judicial entity from the adult criminal justice system. This new judicial system was so different that it did not even use the word “criminal” when describing children and adolescents who committed illegal acts, preferring instead to use the term “juvenile delinquent” or “juvenile offender.” This new judicial system also differed from the adult criminal justice system in that it emphasized a “rehabilitation” approach versus the “punishment” approach that was used in the adult correctional system.

Although the juvenile justice system began as an entity focused on rehabilitating youth offenders, the degree or emphasis on rehabilitative practices has fluctuated over the last century, with juvenile courts instituting at times a more punitive approach based largely on society’s frustration with the significant increases in juvenile offending and increases in the rates of re-offending. As a result of this societal frustration, as well as the increased interest on the part of social and behavioral scientists, research has steadily increased over the years as researchers and practitioners have tried to better understand the factors associated with juvenile offending and re-offending. The result has been the publication of thousands of studies, scholarly writings, books, and position papers that have focused on incidence and prevalence, assessment and diagnosis, education, vocational training,

and risk assessment in the area of juvenile delinquency. In addition to research, a substantial number of theories have been published regarding the etiology of juvenile delinquency, and several laws have been enacted and lawsuits filed that have focused on protecting the rights of juvenile delinquents.

Many professionals and researchers who work directly with or have studied adjudicated delinquents have also begun focusing their efforts on developing effective treatment and prevention programs for reducing recidivism in these youth. In this regard, research findings have identified several commonalities among these youth. For example, one area of commonality that has emerged over the past 25–30 years of empirical research and is the focus of this book is the unmistakable positive relationship between youth who engage in illegal acts and the presence of cognitive, developmental, educational, and mental health disabilities. In fact, emerging research has suggested that if particular youth manifest certain types of disability plus present with certain demographic characteristics, then they are at a higher risk for becoming juvenile offenders and/or re-offending once they have been released from custody. In this regard, we will describe in this book the particular disabilities that have been found to be associated with juvenile delinquency, as well as present some case studies that are illustrative of the types of disabilities and difficulties that youth experience both before and after they become involved in the juvenile justice system. We report not only the findings and theoretical perspectives regarding the relationship between various types of disability and juvenile delinquency but also provide some recommendations and guidelines for mental health professionals, educators, and juvenile justice personnel to consider in their respective work with juvenile offenders.

The book provides an overview of the relationship between disability and delinquency, but more importantly it discusses the various impacts that a disability can have on offending and the processing of a youth through the juvenile justice system. It is intended for individuals who have entered or plan to enter the field of juvenile justice or who will be working with juvenile delinquents in some capacity. It will be especially useful to those who are or will be providing mental health services, special education, or vocational and rehabilitation training to these youth.

Preparation for this book began 15 years ago with a foundation grant from Drs. Lee Meyerson and Nancy Kerr to the second author (RJM) and the University of Arizona's School Psychology Program. The grant supported disability-focused research and public policy and advocacy work, and funds enabled the second author to begin collaboration with local juvenile court personnel and others to plan an organized and systematic program of research and work that centered on understanding the high prevalence of intellectual, cognitive, developmental, learning, emotional, and language disabilities among juvenile delinquents. The funds also permitted the sponsoring of dissertation research and the hiring of graduate students over the years to assist in these research, public policy, and advocacy endeavors. In this regard, we would like to acknowledge the work of the following current and former school psychology doctoral students on the various projects: Priscilla Bade-White, Ph.D.; Julie Duvall, J.D., Ph.D.; Roxanne Edwinson, Ph.D.; Sara Glennon, Ph.D.; Toby Laird, Ph.D.; Emery Mahoney, Ph.D.; Erin Aldrich, Ed.S.; Kimberly Morris, Ph.D.; Katie

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Tucson, AZ, USA

Kristin C. Thompson  
Richard J. Morris

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Thompson, K.C.; Morris, R.J.

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