

# Youth with Learning Disabilities in the Juvenile Justice System: A Training Needs Assessment of Detention and Court Services Personnel

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**ABSTRACT:** This study examines the training needs of juvenile justice personnel regarding their work with youth who have disabilities, particularly learning disabilities. Proportionate stratified cluster sampling was used to survey juvenile detention and court services personnel statewide about previous training and confidence of knowledge in these areas. Findings indicate that less than two-thirds (62%) of respondents had received training about persons with disabilities and less than half (47%) had received training about persons with learning disabilities. Some myths about learning disabilities continue to persist more than others. Knowledge about learning disabilities is considered to be important and training is desired. Suggestions for planning future training events are offered.

**KEY WORDS:** learning disabilities; juvenile justice personnel; training needs.

The purpose of this study was to query juvenile justice personnel about previous training in which they learned about various types of disabilities and to assess if additional training might be needed. A particular interest was to determine the degree to which detention and court services personnel felt confident in their knowledge and skills to work with youth who have learning disabilities. Based upon an

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exhaustive review of the literature, it was determined that a similar study of this population has not been conducted elsewhere.

### **Prevalence of Learning Disabilities Among Youth in the Juvenile Justice System**

There is a much higher prevalence of youth with learning disabilities in the juvenile justice system than in the general population. For example, prevalence studies reveal that between 35.6 (Casey & Keilitz, 1990) and 46% (Quinn, Rutherford & Leone, 2001) of youth in corrections have learning disabilities. According to Leone and Meisel (1999), although it has been difficult to obtain reliable figures, it is usually recognized that the proportion of juveniles in correctional facilities who received special education services before their commitment is at least three to five times higher than youth in public schools who are identified as having a disability. This is in keeping with Keilitz and Dunivant (1986) who report that adolescents with learning disabilities are 220% more likely to be adjudicated than other adolescents.

A similarly high prevalence of youth with special education needs in the juvenile correctional system is reflected in the state where this study was conducted. Between 1993 and 1998, approximately 39 – 42% of the youth committed to the Virginia Department of Juvenile Justice were identified to be eligible for special education services at the time of commitment, and one of the three most frequently identified special education needs was services for youth with learning disabilities (McGarvey & Waite, 2000). Another study, “Educational Consistency for Virginia’s Incarcerated Youth” (1996), found that from 1994 to 1995, 39.7% of youth who were incarcerated were eligible for special education services, and 36% of those were eligible for special education services prior to their commitment.

Although most studies about youth with educational disabilities who are in the juvenile justice system focus on youth in the correctional system, the Virginia Department of Education, Office of State Operated Programs collects data on youth in detention centers. Youth are officially enrolled in school at a detention facility after they have stayed in detention for three days or longer. After enrollment, the special education status of a youth is determined either by identifying that the youth has an existing Individualized Education Plan (IEP), or by assessment at the detention center. In most cases, detention centers do not track the special education status or assess the special education needs of those youth who are in detention fewer than three days.

According to fiscal year September 1999 – June 2000, attendance data collected by the Virginia Department of Education, Office of State Operated Programs, 11,540 students (unduplicated count) were officially enrolled in school at detention. Of these 11,540 youth, 15.5% ( $n = 1,793$ ) were determined to already be receiving special education services at their local school, or were in need of special education services. The three most frequently reported disabilities were emotional disturbance (53%,  $n = 950$ ), learning disability (38%,  $n = 681$ ), and educable mental retardation (6%,  $n = 108$ ). It should be noted that these figures might be much higher than this since they do not reflect multiple responses, but rather, only the primary disability. It is likely that many youth may have two or more disabilities such as emotional disturbance and learning disability.

It is difficult to determine if Virginia is typical of other states across the country since there appears to be discrepancies in how states identify and report incidence of youth with disabilities in the juvenile justice system. In a survey of 30 states, Bullock and McArthur (1994) reported the percentage of incarcerated youth with learning disabilities ranged from 2 to 69%, with an average prevalence rate of 10%. States that reported larger populations of incarcerated youth tended to report lower percentages of youth with disabilities and, likewise, states that reported a small population of incarcerated youth tended to report the highest percentages of youth with disabilities. It is important to consider that national or state incidence rates may not reflect a measure of prevalence, but rather may reflect service delivery rates. Therefore, variations in prevalence across states may be more a measure of availability of services and mechanisms that are in place to identify children and obtain records (P.E. Leone, personal communication, February 24, 2003).

### **Professional Awareness**

A lack of knowledge and awareness among professions about the challenges youth with learning disabilities face may be one reason many of these youth enter the juvenile justice system and why they may be more likely to remain there longer than other youth. As Block (n.d.) concluded:

As student misconduct in school is increasingly criminalized, more and more children with learning disabilities are entering the juvenile justice system. It is critical that all professionals within the system learn more about these children, and more about the opportunities and obstacles that their disabled condition presents. By taking full advantage of legal

protections, and carefully considering the impact that disabilities have on an individual child's behavior, those who work with these children will be in a better position to ensure that the rehabilitative promise of the juvenile justice system is fulfilled, and that our correctional facilities do not become mere holding tanks where disabled children languish (p. 9).

Regarding professional attitudes, the report "Study of Student Transfers Between Public Education and Detention Centers and Juvenile Correctional Centers" (Virginia Department of Education and the Virginia Department of Correctional Education, 1996) states that "some educators, as well as some probation and parole officers do not believe that the students in detention homes and juvenile correctional centers can learn and can acquire the attitude and discipline necessary for educational achievement" (p. 44).

The lack of knowledge and awareness of professionals who work with these youth once they enter the juvenile justice system may have a negative impact on a youth's ability to successfully navigate and complete an educational or rehabilitative program. Without training, professionals may easily misinterpret a youth's behavior as a behavioral problem rather than a function of her or his specific disability. For instance, a youth whose learning disability involves an auditory processing problem could appear uncooperative when he or she simply did not understand the verbal request being made. This puts the youth at risk of being identified as oppositional or "acting smart" if personnel working with the individual do not understand the implications of that particular learning disability. Such situations can increase the youth's frustration and inadvertently escalate the youth's behavior. Because of this, youth with learning disabilities may be vulnerable to repeated disciplinary infractions both in school and throughout the juvenile justice system. They are especially vulnerable when they have not received adequate special education and related services to assist them in meeting the facility's disciplinary rules, and when all school, treatment staff, and line staff do not have the appropriate training to work with them effectively in a multidisciplinary collaborative approach (Meisel, Henderson, Cohen, & Leone, 1998). It is imperative that not only educators, but any personnel working with these youth, have a basic level of knowledge and understanding about learning disabilities. The expected outcome of such training includes appropriate assessment of the youth's service needs and the provision of effective interventions that will assist the youth's compliance with behavioral expectations and rehabilitation.

## Focus of the Current Study

A high prevalence of learning disabilities among youth offenders would seem to suggest a need to insure that personnel who work with these youth are adequately trained to recognize and effectively respond to a youth with a disability, particularly with regard to how such disabilities can affect behavior and decrease the likelihood of the youth's success in a behavior program. The purpose of this survey was to better understand the training needs of juvenile detention and court services employees with regard to learning disabilities among juvenile offenders. Specifically, this study attempted to answer the following five broad questions: (a) which disability topics have juvenile detention and court services personnel received training on, and how long ago did they receive the training? (b) how knowledgeable do juvenile detention and court services personnel report to be in being able to recognize learning disabilities, understand how a learning disabilities may affect youth's behavior, and use appropriate communication strategies when working with youth who have learning disabilities? (c) how informed are juvenile detention and court services personnel about the myths typically associated with learning disabilities? (d) what are juvenile detention and court services personnel's opinion about the importance of being informed about learning disabilities? and (e) what are juvenile detention and court services personnel's preference for training delivery? It is anticipated that the information provided by this study can be used as a guide for planning and providing future training to this population.

## Methodology

### *Design and Data Collection Procedures*

The Virginia Department of Juvenile Justice provided a complete list of court service units located throughout the state. A detention center director provided a similar list of detention facilities. Court service units are divided into three regions that represent Western, Northern, and Eastern geographic areas of the state. Using this list as a guide, detention facilities were categorized into similar regions.

Because some regions of the state are more populated than others, proportionate stratified sampling helped to insure a more representative sample. Surveys were not directly mailed to participants; rather, directors and superintendents agreed to distribute the surveys

to all full-time and part-time staff at their agency. After obtaining an accurate count of the number of employees at each agency, additional court service units were drawn, as needed, in order to obtain the desired sample size for each region of the state. No agency refused to participate.

The study population was comprised of employees from eight detention centers and 18 court service units. This resulted in a sampling frame of 930 employees: 420 detention center employees (87 from the western region, 233 from the northern region, 100 from the eastern region), and 510 court service unit employees (134 from the western region, 225 from the northern region, and 151 from the eastern region). Of the 930 surveys mailed, a total of 350 completed surveys were returned representing an overall response rate of 38%.

### *Sample Characteristics*

As shown in Table 1, the sample was composed primarily of probation officers (61%). Nearly two-thirds (64%) of respondents reported a bachelor's degree as their highest level of education. A little over half (51%) of the respondents reported having worked at their current job for five years, or more, while only 28 and 21% reported having worked at their current job for 1–2 years and 3–4 years respectively. Almost three-quarters (73%) of respondents reported having five years experience, or more, working with juvenile offenders.

### *Study Questionnaire*

The questionnaire was developed with consultation from members of an advisory council. The survey consisted of 35 questions that included single answer items, multiple response items, scaled response items, and one open-ended question. First, the survey instrument asked if respondents ever received training to gain knowledge about five different types of disabilities, and if so, how long ago did they receive the training. Next, a separate set of questions asked if respondents had ever received training where they specifically learned about the various aspects of learning disabilities and how they may manifest themselves in ways that affect academic skills, cognitive skills, and social-emotional-behavioral skills.

Whether or not respondents had received training about learning disabilities, all respondents were asked nine questions that provided a self-assessment of their knowledge and skills when working with youth who have learning disabilities. Specifically, respondents were asked to use a 4-point scale of strongly disagree, disagree, agree, and

**Table 1**  
**Sample Characteristics**

Characteristic	Percent of Total ( $N = 342^a$ )
<i>Job title</i>	
Child/youth care worker	9%
Child/youth counselor	12%
Probation officer	61%
Unit or shift coordinator	2%
Program coordinator/director	5%
Probation director	4%
Administrator	1%
Assistant superintendent	1%
Other	6%
<i>Level of education</i>	
High school graduate or equivalent some college	3%
Associates degree (academic or occupational)	4%
Bachelor's degree	64%
Master's degree	23%
Doctorate	1%
<i>Years employed at current job</i>	
1–2 years	28%
3–4 years	21%
5 years or more	51%
<i>Years working with juvenile offenders</i>	
1–2 years	10%
3–4 years	17%
5 years or more	73%

<sup>a</sup> Due to missing data, the total sample for this table ranged from 337 to 342 depending upon the characteristic reported.

strongly agree, with an option to choose “unsure,” to rate their knowledge and abilities in the following areas: (a) ability to recognize when a learning disability is affecting a juvenile’s academic, cognitive, or social-emotional-behavioral skills; (b) ability to understand how a learning disability in each of these three areas may affect

behavior; (c) ability to use appropriate communication strategies with a juvenile who has a learning disability that affects any one of these three areas. In addition, eight scaled response questions measured respondents' ability to recognize the myths about learning disabilities.

Three scaled response questions measured respondents' opinions about the importance of knowing about learning disabilities in order to perform their job effectively and help youth be successful in a behavioral program. In addition, one question asked respondents if they were very, somewhat, or not at all interested in learning more about the impact of learning disabilities on youth. Last, respondents were provided with six different ways to receive professional training and asked to rank their preferences.

## Findings

### *Previous Training about Disabilities*

Less than two-thirds (62%) of the total sample reported that they received any training about persons with disabilities. Of the respondents who had received training, the majority reported having received training that informed them about persons with mental illness or emotional disorders (79%), an average of 4 years ago (Table 2). The next most frequently reported disability in which respondents reported to have received training was ADHD/ADD (76%), an average of 4 years ago. Forty-seven percent of respondents reported having received training about cultural diversity and persons with disabilities, an average of 4 years ago; while 45% reported they received training about persons with mental retardation, an average of 8 years ago; and 26% reported having received training about persons with autism, an average of 7 years ago. Very few respondents reported having received training on disabilities related to deaf/hard of hearing (14%), or related to vision (11%).

### *Previous Training about Various Aspects of Learning Disabilities*

Less than half (47%) of the respondents reported having received training that informed them about learning disabilities. Of those respondents who received training, 85% received training about the aspect of learning disability that affects social emotional/behavioral skills, an average of 5 years ago (Table 3). This was followed by 76% who reported having received training about the aspect of learning



**Table 2**  
**Previous Training about Disabilities**

Disability Type	Received Training <i>n</i> (%)	Years Ago <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )
Mental illness or emotional disorder	170 (79%)	4 ( <i>SD</i> = 5)
ADHD/ADD	164 (76%)	4 ( <i>SD</i> = 3)
Cultural diversity and persons with disabilities	102 (47%)	4 ( <i>SD</i> = 3)
Mental retardation	97 (45%)	8 ( <i>SD</i> = 8)
Autism	56 (26%)	7 ( <i>SD</i> = 7)
Deaf/hard of hearing	29 (14%)	8 ( <i>SD</i> = 6)
Vision	24 (11%)	9 ( <i>SD</i> = 6)
Other	12 (6%)	3 ( <i>SD</i> = 3)

Note. Percent who received training is based upon multiple responses and calculated by percent of valid cases. Total valid cases 216 (62% of total sample).

**Table 3**  
**Previous Training about Various Aspects of Learning  
Disabilities**

Aspect of Learning Disability	Received Training <i>n</i> (%)	Years Ago <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )
Social emotional/behavioral skills	136 (85%)	5 ( <i>SD</i> = 4)
Cognitive skills	121 (76%)	5 ( <i>SD</i> = 5)
Academic skills	111 (69%)	6 ( <i>SD</i> = 5)
Other	7 (4%)	7 ( <i>SD</i> = 5)

Note. Percent who received training is based upon multiple responses and calculated by percent of valid cases. Total valid cases 160 (46% of total sample).

disability that affects cognitive skills, an average of 5 years ago, and 69% who reported having received training about the aspect of learning disability that affects academic skills, an average of 6 years

ago. Only 4% of respondents reported having received training in other aspects of learning disabilities, an average of 7 years ago.

### *Knowledge about Learning Disabilities*

Nine questions measured all respondents' self-assessment of their knowledge and skills when working with youth who have a learning disability. For a more useful analysis, the 4-point scale used throughout the study was collapsed to strongly disagree/disagree and strongly agree/agree.

Overall, respondents reported being more knowledgeable in their understanding of how learning disabilities may affect a juvenile's behavior than they were in knowing about appropriate communication strategies, or recognizing when a learning disability is affecting a juvenile's academic, cognitive, or social emotional skills. Specifically, on average, 88% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that they understand how various aspects of learning disabilities may affect a juvenile's behavior. However, only 59% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that they know appropriate communication strategies, when working with a youth who has a learning disability and the same number of respondents (59%) strongly agreed or agreed that they know how to recognize when a learning disability affects a juvenile's academic, cognitive, or social emotional skills. A more detailed analysis regarding the findings for each aspect of learning disability is provided in Table 4.

### *Myths about Learning Disabilities*

Respondents' knowledge about the myths of learning disabilities was measured using eight scaled response items (Table 5). Overall, respondents indicated a high ability to recognize the myths of learning disabilities, although some variation was noted. For instance, when asked if juveniles with learning disabilities usually also have low IQs, 18% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed, and 10% reported they were unsure. In addition, although to a lesser extent, two other myths were also not easily identified in that 12% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed, and 4% were unsure that problems experienced by juveniles with learning disabilities are usually obvious and apparent; and given the question, "When asked to listen, read, write, or speak, the behavior of a juvenile with a learning disability may often be misunderstood as non-compliant," 10% of respondents strongly disagreed or disagreed, and 3% were unsure.

**Table 4**  
**Knowledge and Skills about Learning Disabilities**

Question	Percent of Total (N=348 <sup>a</sup> )		
	Strongly Agree/ Agree	Strongly Disagree/ Disagree	Unsure
<i>1. I know how to recognize when a learning disability is affecting a juvenile's</i>			
(a) Academic skills	61%	30%	9%
(b) Cognitive skills	51%	35%	14%
(c) Social/emotional skills	66%	24%	10%
(d) Combined	59%	30%	11%
<i>2. I understand how difficulties in _____ may affect a juvenile's behavior</i>			
(a) Academic skills	94%	3%	3%
(b) Cognitive skills	84%	10%	7%
(c) Social/emotional skills	87%	8%	5%
(d) Combined	88%	7%	5%
<i>3. I know appropriate communication strategies when working with a juvenile who has a learning disability that affects</i>			
(a) Academic skills	64%	28%	8%
(b) Cognitive skills	52%	34%	14%
(c) Social/emotional skills	62%	28%	10%
(d) Combined	59%	30%	11%

Note. The original 4-point scale was collapsed to Strongly Disagree/Disagree, and Strongly Agree/Agree. The "Unsure" category remained the same. <sup>a</sup>Due to missing data, the sample ranged between  $n = 346$  and 348.

### *The Importance of having Knowledge about Learning Disabilities*

Respondents' opinion about the importance of being knowable about learning disabilities was consistently high. For instance, 96% of respondents reported that they disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement, "Learning disabilities are a concern only for teachers who are providing classroom instruction." This was followed by 91% of respondents, who agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, "In

**Table 5**  
**Myths about Learning Disabilities**

Myth	Percent of Total (N = 349 <sup>a</sup> )		
	Strongly Agree/Agree	Strongly Disagree/Disagree	Unsure
1. Most children grow out of their learning disabilities by the time they reach adolescence.	3%	93%	4%
2. Juveniles who have learning disabilities usually also have low IQ's.	18%	72%	10%
3. Problems experienced by juveniles with learning disabilities are usually obvious and apparent.	12%	85%	4%
4. Juveniles who have learning disabilities are usually not capable of learning.	2%	97%	2%
5. Juveniles who have learning disabilities do not want to learn.	2%	97%	1%
6. Once juvenile's enter the juvenile system, they are exempt from entitlements to special education services.	3%	92%	6%
7. Juveniles act and perform in the same way when they have the same learning disability.	3%	94%	3%
8. When asked to listen, read, write, or speak, the behavior of a juvenile with a learning disability may often be mis-interpreted as non-compliant.	86%	10%	3%

Note. The original 4-point scale was collapsed to Strongly Disagree/Disagree, and Strongly Agree/Agree. The "Unsure" category remained the same.

<sup>a</sup> Due to missing data, the sample ranged between  $n = 347$  and 349.

order to perform my job effectively, it is important that I have knowledge about learning disabilities.” Last, 81% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, “Juveniles with learning disabilities may need *all* personnel to use appropriate communication strategies in order to insure their success in a behavioral program.”

Respondents were also asked to indicate their level of interest in learning more about the impact of learning disabilities on juveniles. Seventy-six percent of respondents reported they were “very interested,” 24% reported they were “somewhat interested,” and only 1% of respondents reported they were “not at all interested” in learning more about the subject.

### *Preference for Training Delivery*

Respondents were provided with six different ways to receive professional training and asked to rank them using a scale that started with “1” being the most preferred. Based on the most frequently reported values (mode), a two-day conference and in-service training (on-site local training) were ranked equally as the most preferred method to receive training. A one-day conference ranked second, while video presentations, books and pamphlets, and internet web sites were ranked third, fourth and fifth, respectively.

## **Discussion**

Mental illnesses or emotional disorders and ADHD/ADD were the two most frequently reported disability topics in which juvenile justice personnel have received training. Training in which personnel learned about cultural diversity and persons with mental retardation followed this; while training in topics that related to autism, deaf/hard of hearing, vision disabilities, and other disabilities were reported less frequently.

Regarding training about learning disabilities, the data suggest that the majority of detention and court services personnel reported that it is important knowledge for them to have in order to perform their jobs effectively, and they are very interested in knowing more about this topic. However, less than half of the respondents reported ever having received such training. When planning training for this population, special emphasis should be given to the skills that the majority of respondents indicated they were less knowledgeable

about. Specifically, the findings suggest that detention and court services personnel expressed less confidence in their ability to recognize when a learning disability is affecting a juvenile's academic, cognitive, or social/emotional skills, and in their ability to use appropriate communicate strategies, than they are in their ability to understand how a learning disability may affect a juvenile's behavior. In addition, according to the findings, three myths should also be debunked and clarified at future training events. These myths are: (a) that juveniles who have learning disabilities also have low IQs; (b) that problems experienced by juveniles with learning disabilities are usually obvious and apparent; (c) that when asked to listen, read, write or speak, the behavior of a youth with a learning disability may often be misunderstood as noncompliant. Although the last two myths were not as frequently misunderstood as the first, they too should be a part of a curriculum that is developed to educate and train this population. One implication of juvenile justice personnel being misinformed about the validity of these myths is that many youth may not be recognized as having learning disabilities and, therefore, ultimately may not receive the services they need. They may also not realize a youth's full potential and thus limit the youth's success by not providing needed accommodations, or by labeling a youth's behavior unnecessarily and inaccurately as negative.

When planning training for this population, findings from this study suggest that preference should be given to two-day conferences and inservice training (onsite local training) over other training methods. Other considerations for planning training events are suggested in a report by the Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services, Criminal Justice Research Center (Crone, Willard, & Peterson, 2000). Although this report focused on the needs of staff in group homes, several obstacles highlighted in the report are relevant to and should be considered, when planning training for juvenile justice personnel. Specifically, the report indicated that participation in training is hindered by difficulties in obtaining additional staff to provide coverage for those who are attending training. In addition, the amount of time and expense associated with travel, particularly overnight travel, reduces the opportunities for juvenile justice personnel to participate in training. For these reasons, there was strong support for staff training to be conducted on a regional basis. Further, according to Redding (2001), there is a great need to provide integrated comprehensive, multidisciplinary services to juveniles and their families. Therefore, one of his recommendations is to develop inter-agency joint training programs designed to improve relationships and enhance

collaboration between juvenile justice agencies and local mental health providers, and between juvenile justice agencies and schools.

The findings of this research may be a useful guide for planning future training, but limitations of the study must also be taken into account. First, the survey included both part-time and full-time detention and court services personnel, but this was not included as a variable for analysis. If it had, the findings might have shown that there were notable differences between full-time and part-time staff and that more part-time staff may have been polled in one of the two groups. In addition, there may be important differences between those respondents who agreed to participate and those who did not. Because of this, no valid comparison can be made between the respondents and the sampling frame. Despite these limitations, however, the knowledge gained from the study may be useful when planning training about youth with learning disabilities for this population of human service workers.

In summary, youth with learning disabilities are over-represented in the juvenile justice system. Detention workers and juvenile court personnel recognize the importance to be knowledgeable in this area, yet appear not to have received sufficient training. Without this knowledge, the behavior of youth with disabilities may continue to be misunderstood, and their needs not recognized or provided for. Without adequate training among those who work with them, youth with learning disabilities will most likely remain at risk for continued involvement in the juvenile justice system.

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