A Comparison of Service Use Among Youth Involved with Juvenile Justice and Mental Health

Key Details

KEY WORDS
Youth, service use, criminal justice, mental health, risk, prevention

POPULATION GROUP
Youth in Conflict with the Law, Youth with Disabilities or Special Needs

STEPPING UP THEMES
Health and Wellness,
Diversity, Social Inclusion and Safety

RESEARCH ORIGIN
Canada

SOURCE
Academic

"Youth are at a greater risk of offending when they carry multiple diagnoses for mental health issues."

1. What is the research about?

Substantial research evidence indicates that the mental health needs of young offenders have not been adequately addressed. This research study compares youth in correctional services to youth in mental health programs in order to assess their vulnerability to mental health risk, juvenile delinquency, and engagement in formal social services.

The following questions were used to guide the research:

- How does the incidence of mental health concerns among youth in the justice system compare with the mental health concerns of youth using mental health services?
- How do youth in correctional services and youth in mental health programs compare in terms of lifetime service use?

2. Where did the research take place?

This quantitative research took place in Atlantic Canada. The principal investigators for the study were based at the Resilience Research Centre at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia.

3. Who is this research about?

A subsample of 152 participants from a sample of 497 youth was used for this comparison study. This subsample was used because it consisted of youth who were identified as being involved in high intensity programs (full day attendance or residential) from either youth justice or mental health services.

The subsample had the following demographics:

- Participants between the ages of 13 and 21 with a mean age of 16.36 years; 32% of the sample was female and 68% was male.
- An overrepresentation of visible minority youth, especially in the youth justice service sample (where youth were more likely to be older males from lone parent homes), where 39.7% of the 152 youth reported being a visible minority. Only 2.6% of the Atlantic Canada population identify as such.

4. How was the research done?

This research was quantitative. Researchers used multiple validated survey instruments. Data analysis explored the effects of age, sex, parental presence, and self-reporting as a visible minority on engagement with mental health and justice services.

5. What are the key findings?

This study found that although youth involved in justice services showed similar levels of mental health risks when compared to youth who accessed mental health services, youth involved in the justice system reported much less contact with mental health programs, as well as contact with other forms of social services, such as healthcare and education, when compared to youth from mental health services. This was most apparent and significant for youth from justice services showing internalized behavioral risk. These findings suggest that the provision of earlier mental health interventions can be an effective preventative step for diverting youth from involvement in the legal system.

6. Why does this research matter for youth work?

The first point of contact for many youth who display maladaptive behaviors is the youth justice system. Studies have shown that approximately 74% of girls and 66% of boys in the youth justice system are struggling with at least one mental health disorder. Given the high mental health needs of legally involved youth, this study shows that providing earlier mental health interventions, in addition to other forms of formal social supports (health care and education) may act as strong protective and preventive factors to diverge and/or prevent youth from becoming involved in the correctional system.

This research indicates that:

- Service providers need to have better capacity to identify youth with mental health needs earlier in order to help divert or prevent youth from entering the judiciary system.
- Youth justice programs need to provide more mental health supports to young offenders to create better outcomes for marginalized youth.
- The school system should be better equipped to more effectively identify and work with youth who may have mental health needs.

Liebenberg, L., & Ungar, M. (2014). A comparison of service use among youth involved with juvenile justice and mental health. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 39, 117-122.