



Mental Health and Transitions from Adolescence to Emerging Adulthood

Key Details

KEY WORDS

Mental health, adolescence, emerging adulthood, transition-aged youth, health equity, diversity

POPULATION GROUP

All Youth

STEPPING UP THEMES

Health and Wellness, Diversity, Social Inclusion, and Safety; Coordinated and Youth-Friendly Communities

RESEARCH ORIGIN

Ontario

SOURCE

Academic

“Neither the ‘child’ nor the ‘adult’ service system is optimally designed for youth in late adolescence and the early stages of emerging adulthood.”

1. What is the research about?

Researchers estimate that nearly 40% of youth experience mental health challenges. Adolescence and emerging adulthood are critical developmental periods that are heavily associated with the emergence of mental health challenges. Youth mental health affects outcomes in other areas of a young person's life and if not addressed, may cause mental health concerns to persist into adulthood. This research underlines the need to create proactive services that understand the impact of developmental changes on youth mental health and the need to be responsive to the diverse needs of youth who need such support in order to transition effectively to adulthood.

2. Where did the research take place?

This research was a literature review that examined evidence from Canada, the United States and England.

3. Who is this research about?

This academic article focuses its research on transition-aged youth – defined as youth who are receiving services and will need ongoing support from childhood to adulthood (Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, 2012) or adolescents who are transitioning into adulthood. The definition of transition-aged youth can vary and each individual's experiences of onset and developmental change will be different but generally, this stage is known to occur between the ages of 16 and 25 (Davis and Vander Stoep, 1997).

The populations most at risk for having mental health struggles while transitioning from adolescence into adulthood are youth with fewer socioeconomic resources, youth living in poverty, Aboriginal youth, racialized and ethnic minority youth, LGBTQ youth, youth who are street involved, youth who are in conflict with the law, youth involved in the child welfare system, and youth with disabilities.

4. How was the research done?

This research reviewed literature from the past fifteen years that focused on mental health challenges facing transition-aged youth in order to put forward a set of recommendations for action. The authors describe how developmental issues and mental health often intersect. The review engages research literature that contextualizes individual developmental trajectories affected by risk and protective factors.

5. What are the key findings?

Adolescence and emerging adulthood are onset periods for mental health problems. Youth who have diverse and intersecting identities and social locations are more at risk for having mental health concerns when transitioning to adulthood. Depression, anxiety, and substance use disorders are the most common mental health issues that youth face during this time. Many youth will use this time period to explore their sense of identity as well as their need for autonomy and independence.

Mental health service providers need to be more aware of how developmental changes such as puberty, dating, sexual exploration, and employment can affect mental health. The resources and services designed to address these problems should include an understanding of developmental issues and how these intersect with diverse life experiences. For example, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans youth sometimes experience high levels of stress during adolescence about their sexual orientation and/or gender identity, which can result in internal and external conflict.

6. Why does this research matter for youth work?

Youth aged 15 and 24 are more likely to report mental health issues and/or problematic substance use dependence than any other age groups. Youth mental health issues can also increase criminal involvement and contributes significantly to health care costs.

Presently, there are few services that focus on transition-aged youth and current services do not readily address their needs. This research provides a good overview of mental health issues among transition-aged youth and the common barriers many face to access appropriate and effective services. It emphasizes the need to take a developmental and contextualized approach to designing supports for young people requiring mental health supports during their transition to adulthood.

Key recommendations you can consider when addressing mental health needs of transition-aged youth:

- Create more services for transition-aged youth and implement more collaborative efforts between the “child” and “adult” systems.
- Address mental health onsets early and have a more preventative approach by enhancing youth protective factors.
- Reduce stigma by creating more awareness on youth mental health to normalize mental health challenges as part of an individual’s overall health.
- Meet youth “where they are at.” Allow youth to access mental health supports “through any door,” be it in a school, health care, religious or social service setting.
- Encourage more collaboration across different sectors (e.g., education, youth justice, child welfare, mental health) to increase access.
- Target populations most at risk for mental health challenges; utilize a health equity lens in addressing mental health challenges at the community and individual level.

Through a collaborative effort across sectors and disciplines, a stronger and more responsive system of care can be built for future generations.



MacLeod, K. B., & Brownlie, E. B. (2014). *Mental Health and Transitions from Adolescence to Emerging Adulthood: Developmental and Diversity Considerations*. *Canadian Journal of Community Mental Health*, 33(1), 77-86.