Prevalence of Psychiatric Disorders in Youth in Juvenile Detention


Several articles pertaining to the mental health needs of youth in juvenile detention have been published in recent years, but many have lacked the rigorous methodology necessary to generalize from results. The authors of this article sought to add to this body of research, by conducting a comprehensive psychiatric analysis of a large, stratified sample of youth in juvenile detention using a well-validated, standardized instrument.

Participants were 1,829 male and female youth between 10 and 18 years who were randomly sampled upon intake to the Chicago area Cook County Temporary Detention Center (CCJTDC) between 1995 and 1998. The sample was stratified based upon participant sex, ethnicity (white, Hispanic, African American), and age (≤ 13, 14 – 15, ≥ 16). Similar to the underlying population in the CCJTDC, the sample was primarily male (64.1%) and had a mean age of 15 years old. The sample was 54.9% African American, 28.7% Hispanic, and 16.2% white. Given the large sample size, the authors note that the power of their statistical analyses to detect disorders that occur in at least 1.0% of the general population was relatively high, at .80. Participating youth were interviewed over two to three hours using version 2.3 of the Diagnostic Interview Schedule for Children (DISC), which assesses the presence of *DSM-III-R* diagnoses in the past 6-months.

Results revealed a high rate of at least one disorder in both boys (66.3%) and girls (73.8%), with a significantly higher rate among girls. For both males and females, the highest rates of diagnoses were for substance use disorders (50.7% and 46.8%, respectively), disruptive behavior disorders (41.4% and 45.6%, respectively), and anxiety disorders (21.3% and 30.8%, respectively). Females were significantly more likely to have a number of disorders, including any affective disorder, any anxiety disorder, and substance use disorders other than alcohol or marijuana use.

Analyses based on participant ethnicity revealed that for both males and females, white youth had the highest rates of diagnoses for many disorders, including any disorder, any disruptive disorder, and any substance use disorder. African Americans had rates of disorder significantly lower or equal to white and Hispanic youth for all disorders except separation anxiety disorder in males. Among males, Hispanic youth had the highest prevalence rates for any anxiety disorder, panic disorder, and obsessive-compulsive disorder. Among females, Hispanic youth had the highest prevalence rates for generalized anxiety disorder and oppositional-defiant disorder.

Comparison of disorder prevalence based on participant age differed between males and females. For males, children in the 14-15 and ≥ 16 age groups had significantly higher rates of disorders than younger children for many disorders, including any disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, and any substance use disorder. The only disorder for which there was a significant difference between children in the 14-15 age group and those ≥ 16 was psychotic disorder, with 14 and 15 year-olds having a higher prevalence. Among females, the age groups were more similar in their rates of disorder, although children in the younger two age groups had significantly higher rates of oppositional defiant disorder than youth ≥ 16. Youth in both the older age groups had significantly higher rates of any substance use disorder and marijuana use disorder than youth ≤ 13.

Taken together, perhaps the most important finding from this research is the high rate of psychiatric disorders in both male and female youth in a juvenile detention facility, with approximately 66% of boys and 74% of girls meeting diagnostic criteria for at least one disorder. These rates suggest that youth in juvenile detention have higher mental health needs than those in the general population, similar to other high-risk youth populations. Although one might expect high rates of conduct- and substance-related disorders among youth in a juvenile detention facility, of particular interest are the high rates of anxiety and affective disorders in this sample. Interestingly, while African American and...
Hispanic youth are overrepresented in the juvenile justice system (and in this sample), white youth had the highest prevalence rates for most disorders in this study, suggesting that detained white youth may have the greatest level of dysfunction. Similarly, while more males are detained than females, females had significantly higher prevalence than males for several disorders. Older children tended to have more disorders than younger children, particularly boys.

Given the nature of this study, it is important to note that causality cannot be implied; that is, we cannot conclude that psychiatric disorder causes greater criminal behavior among youth. Nevertheless, the authors hypothesize that recent public policy changes, including welfare reform and managed care may be causing a high level of unmet need for mental health services in the general population, resulting in greater detention of youth with mental disorders who might otherwise receive treatment in the community. Whatever the cause, this study adds to an existing body of evidence strongly suggesting the need for mental health interventions among youth involved with the juvenile justice system and the need for coordinating care and research among the various branches of child-serving agencies.