

Improving Health Outcomes for Justice-Involved Youth: Bridging the Juvenile Justice and Healthcare Divide

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Summary: This presentation discusses the scope of unmet physical and mental health needs of justice-involved youth in the US. I will discuss findings from published studies, my own extensive clinical experience with juveniles in California, and preliminary research findings from a total population study of hospitalizations among detained youth in California. I recommend system integration strategies aimed at improving the overall health and well-being of this population.

Research suggests that, compared to other youth, a greater number of adolescents involved in the juvenile justice system suffer from severe medical and mental health problems. Often these health problems are intimately linked with the activities and behaviors that lead to their involvement in the juvenile justice system, including truancy, substance abuse, and physical and sexual violence. Few studies to date have adequately characterized the severity of these youths' unmet health needs and the resources required to address those needs. And very few jurisdictions have successfully integrated the various systems that are in place to serve justice-involved youth in a way that effectively improves their health and well-being.

Approach: To examine the severity and extent of unmet health needs among justice-involved youth in this country and the potential approaches needed to improve long-term health outcomes, I provide a brief summary of the available research on the health status of this population of youth, along with brief vignettes and observations from my clinical practice with detained adolescents. Specifically, there is consistent evidence to demonstrate that justice-involved youth have a higher prevalence of physical, dental, reproductive health, and especially mental health problems compared to their non-involved peers. The life stories I hear in my daily clinical practice suggest that many of the activities that lead to the arrest and detention of youth are grounded in unaddressed severe mental health problems exacerbated by difficult social environments.

Further, I provide preliminary findings from a recent study our group at the Stanford School of Medicine conducted, looking at hospitalizations among all detained youth in California during a ten-year period to characterize the nature of their most severe health-related problems. The overwhelming majority of hospitalizations stemmed from mental health problems such as severe depression, highlighting the burden of unmet health needs for these youth prior to detention.

Policy recommendations and relevance: None of the various systems employed to deal with youth delinquency --law enforcement, juvenile justice, probation, medical services, and mental health among others-- can or do adequately address the needs of justice-involved youth alone. I recommend considering:

1. Systematic, directed evaluations to diagnose and treat the physical and mental health problems of this population during their time in detention;
2. Strong links between detention clinicians and health resources in the community to ensure continuity of care and appropriate services to address health needs upon release.
3. Incentives for cross-discipline and cross-departmental approaches to caring for these youth, with an emphasis on overall positive health and life outcomes rather than simply reduction of recidivism.

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