

Colorado Probation Research in Brief

Adverse Childhood Experiences, Coping Resources, and Mental Health Problems among Court-Involved Youth

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Key Words: ACE, juvenile justice, trauma, resiliency, childhood maltreatment, family dysfunction, social support

Summary/Conclusions

The present study sought to examine how Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are related to mental health problems with court-involved youth and if the lack of coping skills compounded mental health problems. From a sample of 5,378 juveniles, 74.1% reported at least one exposure to maltreatment, 70.4% reported one or more exposures to family dysfunction, and 64.1% reported one or more exposures to social disadvantage. Youth with exposure to maltreatment were significantly more likely to have mental health problems, mental health interference with probation, and suicidal ideation.

Limitations of Information

The study is limited by the narrow mental health information that can be measured from the risk and need assessment. Information gathered cannot be considered a substitute for mental health evaluations. Although the assessment queries mental health diagnosis, youth involved in the study may not have access to appropriate mental health care to receive a diagnosis. The study was conducted in a western state that may or may not be comparable to Colorado.

Caveat: The information presented here is intended to summarize and inform readers of research and information relevant to probation work. It can provide a framework for carrying out the business of probation as well as suggestions for practical application of the material. While it may, in some instances, lead to further exploration and result in future decisions, it is not intended to prescribe policy and is not necessarily conclusive in its findings. Some of its limitations are described above.

Scholars have argued that increased exposure to difficulties in childhood contribute to mental health problems in court-involved youth. Limited research hampers efforts to explain why some youth with ACEs suffer from mental health issues while others with similar experiences do not. The present study uses assessment data from a sample of youth on probation to better understand the factors that contribute to or mitigate mental health issues with court-involved youth.

Researchers analyzed Washington State Juvenile Court Assessment data from 5,378 juveniles on probation. Questions related to childhood maltreatment, family dysfunction, and social disadvantage were analyzed to determine exposure to ACEs. Researchers also collected information on coping resources (e.g. impulse control, aspirations, social support) and mental health problems. A series of models were used to determine if there were any relationships within the data.

The assessment data highlighted the exposure of ACEs with youth. A large portion of the sample (74.1%) reported at least one exposure to maltreatment, 70.4% reported at least one exposure to family dysfunction, and 64.1% reported at least one exposure to social disadvantage. Over a quarter (26.5%) of the youth reported mental health problems. Childhood maltreatment was shown to be significantly related to mental health problems, mental health interfering with probation, and suicidal ideation. Social disadvantage was actually shown to be

negatively associated with mental health problems and suicidal ideation. Aspirations (i.e. future success, optimism, goal-setting) significantly moderated all mental health indicators, suicidal ideation, mental health interfering with probation, and mental health problems and helped buffer mental health interfaces with probation when youth had exposure to high family dysfunction. Finally, social support tempered mental health problems in all three types of ACEs.

Practical Applications

- ✓ Use available resources to refer youth for appropriate behavioral health screening, testing, and evaluation.
- ✓ Some individuals may feel uncomfortable discussing mental health issues, consider starting with lower stakes conversations before deep conversations about possible mental health issues or concerns.
- ✓ Discuss future aspirations of court-involved youth. Such conversations may help establish optimism and positive visions for the future.
- ✓ Consider adopting trauma informed care techniques into your supervision approaches.
- ✓ Use social network maps to help juveniles understand their social support systems. Help juveniles build social support networks that are reliable and pro-social.
- ✓ Provide affirmations and other reinforcements for behaviors that demonstrate the use of healthy coping skills.
- ✓ Help juvenile probationers practice and develop problem-solving skills.