Lost in Transition: Illicit Substance Use and Services Receipt Among At-Risk Youth in the Child Welfare System

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1. Introduction

Illicit Substance Use Among Malnourished Adolescents

The extent to which adolescents in the child welfare system (CWS) present problems with illicit substance use is unknown. Adolescents who are in contact with the CWS are at high risk for substance use problems. Substance use is often part of a constellation of other risky behaviors and mental health problems in adolescents and their families. Access to mental health and substance abuse services is of great concern among youth in the CWS, given recent years involving a drop in services when these youth age out of the system, and subsequently dismal mental health outcomes in early adulthood.

2. Study Aims

The goal of this study was to analyze the relationship between use of illicit substances and receipt of services among adolescents in the CWS from the time of the index report of maltreatment, when they were between age 11 and 15, and across the subsequent seven years. An additional goal was to examine the effect of CWS facilitating adolescents’ use of outpatient and inpatient services at the time of contact and longitudinally as adolescents transition to young adulthood.

3. Study Methods

NCSA is a nationally representative, longitudinal study of the well-being of children aged 15 or younger who have had contact with CWS. Eligible children entered CWS through investigations of child abuse or neglect. Interviews were conducted with youth, caregivers, and counselors, focused on a variety of child, family, and community variables. Timepoints were baseline/investigation, 18 months, 3 years, 5 years, and 7 years. Response rate by the follow up waves ranged from 82% to 87%.

Study Sample

Adolescents aged 11-15 years at completion of the study were 93% males, 9% Hispanic, 2.2% African American, and 17.0% American Indian/Alaskan Native. In addition to cross-sectional evaluation of rates of illicit substance use and all other services across adolescence, logistic regression analysis modeled service use as a function of illicit substance use and adolescents characteristics. All analyses were conducted with weights that were calculated with the SUDAAN statistical package, version 9.0.1, to take into account NCSA’s complex sampling design.

4. Results

5. Summary of Findings, Conclusions, and Policy Implications

Summary of Findings

- At baseline, the adjusted odds that youth with illicit substance use received outpatient services were four times the odds for youth without illicit substance use.
- At all follow-up periods, there were no significant differences in the odds for outpatient services by illicit substance use.
- In general, there were no significant differences in the odds for inpatient services receipt by illicit substance use (table shown).

Conclusions

- Use of illicit substances was predictive of outpatient specialty mental health/substance use services receipt immediately following entry into the child welfare system.
- Over time, the association between illicit substance use and service use fell disappointingly.
- The farther an adolescent was from their initial contact with the CWS, the less likely they were to receive outpatient services, despite increases in illicit substance use.

Policy Implications

- Given the rates of illicit substance use in this population (more than 60% for the time they reach transition age), substance use should be a routine part of CWS assessments.
- Contact with school counselors and physicians was predictive of mental health and substance abuse services use at every wave. For those adolescents in the CWS identified as at risk for substance abuse, counselors should work directly with these providers to generate a net of support that can facilitate receipt of services whenever in need.

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