For Youths with Mental Health Disorders Who Were Involved with the Criminal Justice System, Education is Critical for Job Success

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Youths who become involved with the criminal justice system may face many barriers to completing their education and finding employment. According to recent research, an estimated 50-70% of these youths have a mental health disorder such as bipolar disorder, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), or substance use disorder. Youths with mental health disorders who become involved in the justice system (justice-involved youths) may need tailored supports in order to achieve their educational and employment goals. Youths who are arrested while in high school may not graduate or receive a high school diploma, which could have a negative impact on their future employment. Past research has found a connection between finishing high school and attaining employment for justice-involved youths, but there is little research on whether the same connection exists for justice-involved youth with mental health disorders. In a recent NIDILRR-funded study, researchers looked at data following a group of justice-involved youths over a 7-year period into their early 20s. They wanted to find out how the justice-involved youths with a mental health disorder differed from their peers without such disorders in terms of their experiences with school and employment before and after justice involvement. They also wanted to find out whether completing high school or college was associated with longer-term employment for the justice-involved youths with and without mental health disorders.

Researchers at the Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Learning and Working During the Transition to Adulthood (Transitions ACR) looked at data from 1,261 justice-involved youths in Pennsylvania and Arizona who were enrolled in a larger study called the Pathways to Desistance study. The youths were 14-18 years old when they joined the study, and they entered the study after being found guilty of a serious crime such as assault, burglary, or drug or property felonies.

As part of the Pathways to Desistance study, the youths were interviewed when they entered the study after adjudication or arraignment, and then they were interviewed 10 times over the next 7 years (every 6 months for the first 3 years and then every year thereafter).

During the initial interview, the youths and their parents completed a series of questions to test whether or not the youths had any mental health disorders, including depression, bipolar disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, substance use disorder, or ADHD. The youths were also asked about their school attendance and conduct in school and their employment history, including where they had worked, how much they earned, how many hours and weeks they had worked for pay, and whether they had been fired from a job.
At the follow-up interviews, the youths were again asked about their education and employment history, including what level of education they had completed. Receiving a GED was considered minimal education; receiving a high school or college diploma or a vocational training certificate was considered more than minimal education.

The researchers found that 44% of the youths had at least one mental health disorder. When they looked at differences between the youths with and without mental health disorders, they found that:

- When they joined the study, the youths with mental health disorders reported more problems with school, such as missing classes, being suspended, or being expelled than the youths without mental health disorders. For example, 47% of the youths with mental health disorders had been expelled from a school, compared with 35% of the youths without mental health disorders.
- When they joined the study, more of the youths with mental health disorders had also been fired from a job (21%) than the youths without mental health disorders (13%).
- Fewer of the youths with mental health disorders completed more than a minimal education (obtained diploma or certificate) over the 7 years, compared to their peers without these disorders. Only 35% of the youths with mental health disorders obtained a high school or college diploma or vocational certificate, compared with 43% of the youths without mental health disorders.
- The youths with mental health disorders were more likely than their peers without mental health disorders to complete only minimal education (obtain a GED instead of a high school diploma). Over the 7 years, about 31% of the youths with mental health disorders received a GED compared with 23% of the youths without mental health disorders.
- About 35% of the youths in both groups did not complete minimal education and did not obtain a diploma, certificate, or a GED.

When the researchers looked at the number of weeks worked and total earnings over the 7 years, they found that the youths with and without mental health disorders worked for similar lengths of time and had similar earnings. However, regardless of whether or not the youths had a mental health disorder, the youths who obtained a high school or college diploma or a vocational certificate worked for longer periods and earned more after receiving their degree than the youths who received either a GED or no credential.

The authors noted that youths with mental health disorders may face multiple challenges that could place them at risk for justice involvement. Once involved with the justice system, these youths may face more difficulties completing school than their justice-involved peers without mental health disorders. Justice-involved youths with mental health disorders may benefit from specialized supports to help them move away from justice involvement, to a more positive path of finishing school or training and
finding stable work. Educational completion, in particular, was critical for the youths in this study to maximize their earning potential. Providers working with justice-involved youths may want to emphasize educational attainment as a goal for these youths that will lead to stability, economic independence, and empowerment.

To Learn More

The Transitions ACR offers a range of information resources and tools for young people with mental health conditions, educators, employers, and service providers, including

- Teens on IEPs: Making my “Transition” Services Work for Me
- Becoming an Adult: Challenges for Those with Mental Health Conditions
- Testing Whether Multisystemic Therapy for Emerging Adults Can Reduce Their Justice System Involvement.

The Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Pathways to Positive Futures also features a large selection of publications, tools, and videos for young people with mental health conditions transitioning to college or the workforce and the professionals who support them, including an entire issue of the Focal Point journal devoted to Justice and Recovery.

To Learn More About this Study


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