

Research Snapshot

Service Coordination for At-Risk Youth and Poverty Reduction

What is this project?

In London Ontario, one in four children live in poverty – this means 25% of our young people are growing up without access to basic needs. Factors that have been linked to youth poverty include inadequate or a lack of housing and employment, not receiving an education, and having untreated mental health needs. In an effort to respond to these needs a three-year project involving service coordination was developed at LFCC. The goal of the project was to quickly respond to the identified needs of court involved and high-risk youth. Youth were assisted with poverty related concerns including housing crises, schooling needs, mental health services, employment skills, finances, and transportation needs. The project's two service coordinators received referrals from various professionals in the community and responded to the needs of 133 youth over the course of 2.5 years: 20 accessed the service more than once.

What did the evaluation study involve?

This project benefited from a third-party evaluator who drew conclusions based on an analysis of information collected from youth, parents, and community stakeholders. Of the 133 young people, 39 consented to the evaluation study which was comprised of interviews, self-report questionnaires, as well as service coordinators' case notes. This study identified barriers for at-risk youth in areas most directly related to poverty: mental health, housing, education and employment. The benefits and challenges of service coordination with this group of young people were also examined.

What did we find?

Mental Health: Mental health problems and barriers to services were prevalent for this group of youth. Service coordination increased young people's sense of support and their access to mental health services.

- 97% of the youth were 'at-risk' of at least one mental health problem
- 89% had experienced at least one traumatic event in their lifetime
- A barrier for youth accessing mental health services was a lack of transportation
- Along with transportation, service coordinators offered emotional support, consulted with other service providers, and accompanied youth to appointments

Housing: Most youth reported being in stable housing at project start. Young people's housing histories are nevertheless characterized as unstable with many lifetime moves and episodic homelessness.

- 90% reported being in stable housing at the time of the initial interview
- Throughout the duration of the program, several youth experienced destabilized housing and required assistance securing new housing and utilizing the emergency shelter system
- 46% moved 10 or more times in their lifetime and 56% had experienced homelessness
- Barriers identified included a scarcity of youth-specific shelter and housing programs and limited financial assistance that may result in unsafe living arrangements

Education and Employment: Many youth were enrolled in school but they reported a lack of motivation, which resulted in poor attendance. Behavioural and safety issues also resulted in poor school progress for many. Some youth had work-related experience, but their earnings were inadequate to support them. Positively, at project end, youth reported improvements in the areas of education and employment.

- 72% of youth said they were enrolled in school at project start, with approximately one third indicating they attended regularly
- 85% had been suspended from school at least once; 31% had been expelled in the past
- 82% reported increased school engagement since working with service coordinators who helped them enroll in school, deal with administrative complexities, and transported them to support regular attendance
- 40% reported they were currently employed or had been within the last year, 33% had job training, 44% had volunteered over the last year
- Half of the youth were receiving financial assistance from the government
- Many experienced food insecurity which resulted in service coordinators accompanying youth to the food bank
- Barriers were a lack of part-time employment programs that could support youth with the needs as identified (for those still in school) and resources needed to secure and maintain employment, such as transportation, driver's license, identification, and a phone
- Service coordinators assisted with employment gains by exploring job skill opportunities, attending job-related appointments and advocating for volunteer placements

How can we use this research?

The project identified several barriers and challenges to meeting the mental health, housing, as well as the educational and employment needs of court-involved and high-risk young people. A lack of transportation for accessing existing resources and services, the scarcity of youth-specific programs for housing and employment, limited and hard to access financial assistance, and a lack of motivation and energy for engaging in a schooling program were a few of the barriers faced by these youth. Service coordinators assisted youth by: helping them enroll in school, dealing with administrative complexities within the educational, housing and financial areas, transporting and accompanying them to critical appointments to assist with their mental health and daily life needs, consulting with other service providers who could offer support, and exploring within their community job and volunteer opportunities.

We learned that transportation poverty is pervasive in the lives of these youth. Without easily accessible

and reliable transportation, many youth were unable to attend scheduled appointments or access needed programs. Parents said that service coordination helped to connect youth to needed community supports and ensured that youth attended their appointments. Many youth spoke of the benefits of having access to safe transportation, as well as the positive connections, counselling on specific concerns and encouragement offered during one-to-one conversations in the car. Young people's feedback about these interactions suggests they felt understood as well as respected.

Recommendations:

In the future, service coordination efforts could be improved by: 1) considering the importance of supporting youth with transportation services; 2) helping to support young peoples' need for reminders and concrete support in keeping and attending appointments; 3) assist youth with navigating the administrative aspects of adult-focused services (e.g., financial and housing programs).

About this Summary: This summary was prepared by Hailey Kolpin, MA, based on a research study conducted by Dr. Debbie Chiodo, Provincial System Support Program, CAMH (Third Party Evaluator). This research was conducted at LFCC with contributions by, Dr. Joyce Radford and Dr. Dan Ashbourne. For further information about London Family Court Clinic, visit www.lfcc.on.ca

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