Psychiatric Disorders Persist Among Adults Arrested as Youth

Fifteen years after detention, adolescents with untreated mental health issues still exhibited a disorder.

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Young people who are arrested as juveniles and have psychiatric disorders that remain untreated continue to experience mental health problems well into mid-adulthood, suggest new study findings published in JAMA Pediatrics by Northwestern Medicine researchers.

For their study, investigators used data from the Northwestern Juvenile Project to assess and track 13 psychiatric disorders among 16,372 people detained in juvenile centers as teenagers. These youth were followed up until their early 30s.

Scientists learned that about two thirds of males (64%) and more than one third of females (35%) who had one or more psychiatric disorders while in detention still had a disorder 15 years later. Males were three times more likely than females to experience persistent psychiatric disorders. In addition, females exhibited fewer mental issues than males as time passed.

Researchers attributed this disparity to females becoming more family-oriented as they aged. “Positive social connections—having a stable partner, raising children, establishing a family—are conducive to positive mental health,” said Karen Abram, PhD, a professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at Northwestern University’s Feinberg School of Medicine and a study coauthor.

Findings also showed that disruptive behavior and substance use disorders were the most common mental health issues young people experienced after release from detention. White adults were more likely to have these disorders than Black and Latino adults despite minorities being disproportionately incarcerated.

Overall, young people with untreated psychiatric disorders not only struggled with their mental health but also faced difficulties securing a proper education and maintaining stable relationships, employment and housing.

“Clearly, we must expand mental health services during the detention and when these youth return to their communities,” said Linda Teplin, PhD, a professor of psychiatry and behavioral

sciences at the Feinberg School of Medicine and the study's lead author. "We must also encourage pediatricians and educators to advocate for early identification and treatment of psychiatric disorders."

But since school systems in America are funded by local governments, this makes it more likely that children will continue to be "sentenced to a life of inequity because of their ZIP code," Teplin added.

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