

An Examination of Substance Use and its Relationship to Criminogenic Needs in the Context of Canada's Youth Justice System

Working with homeless youth at La San charity school in Saigon, Vietnam, I noticed unhealthy substance use to be a common issue in young people faced with adversity early in life. The lack of support often leaves disadvantaged youth turning to drugs for temporary escape (Jean, 2016) - a reality that is evident in high rates of substance use disorders (SUD) among young offenders in the context of Canada's juvenile justice system.

There is consistent evidence that justice-involved youth have high rates of substance use, with estimates varying from 20% to as high as 51% of this population meeting the criteria for SUD¹ (Sales., 2018). Given the prevalence of SUD in the young offender population, it is rather counterintuitive that drug/alcohol use is only a "modest" predictor of criminal offending (Guebert & Olver, 2014). Kapoor et al. (2018) proposed this is such because substance use has different roles in each individual's offence. For some youth, substance use is a 'criminogenic need', meaning a strong and direct risk factor for offending (e.g., when a youth commits crimes to support their drug use). For others, substance use is problematic in other aspects of youth's lives (e.g., interfering with education, employment, or personal relationships) but is not directly related to their offending (Kapoor et al., 2018).

However, little is known regarding the relationship between substance abuse, mental health issues, and criminogenic needs in the context of intervention. This understanding regarding the intersection of psychology and youth justice practice could be crucial for matching service intensity to an individual's risk level and in turn, improve treatment success. Through our project, we aim to replicate and extend Guebert and Olver's (2014) results on the relationships among mental disorders, substance use, and criminogenic needs in addition to examining the extent to which needs are addressed while youth are on probation. If replicated, we believe potential implications of this research - as Guebert and Olver (2014) have previously suggested - could be that more individual's specific concerns would be considered and incorporated into intervention plans resulting in increased treatment needs matched and ultimately, decreased recidivism rates.

Our main research questions:

1. What are the relationships between substance abuse, mental health issues, and criminogenic needs in a Canadian forensic population?
2. To what extent do criminogenic needs get addressed while youth are on probation in a Canadian forensic population?
3. Is there an association between treatment needs matched and recidivism rates?

¹ Different sample type and methodologies used by studies resulting in variation between estimates (explained by Guebert and Olver, 2014)

To answer the research questions, we will use the existing Center of Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) database (access permission granted by Dr. Tracey A. Skilling) to run our statistical analyses. Because the data already exists in the CAMH database, our project can be accomplished remotely. We also have an approved Research Ethics Board protocol that covers this project.

Our analytic plans:

Week 1-2: To answer research question 1, we will first report descriptive information on a forensic sample of Canadian youth, and report correlations between criminogenic needs and mental health disorders in youth with and without SUD. Next, we will compare the average criminogenic need/mental health need scores between a group of youth with and without SUD using t-tests to determine if the differences between the groups are statistically significant.

Week 3-4: To answer research question 2, we will report how well youth are matched with services they need while on probation for each criminogenic need domain (e.g., how well are youth with education needs matched to education services?) and we will compare match rates for youth with and without SUD. Next, we will compare average scores between SUD/non-SUD using t-tests to determine if the differences for service need match and risk scores youth are statistically significant.

Week 5-6: To answer research question 3, we will use match scores in each area of need (e.g., family, leisure, etc.) as variables to build models predicting recidivism (logistic regression) for a group of youth with SUD and a group without SUD.

In order to ensure the project's success, prior to the start of the Laidlaw Program I will join with graduate students in Professor Peterson-Badali's Youth Justice Lab to learn how to conduct literature reviews, understand research designs, and identify and implement designs and statistical analyses that will allow me to answer my research questions in a reliable and valid manner. Throughout the six to eight weeks of the actual research, Dr. Michele Peterson-Badali and I will be working closely together to ensure the project's findings are well-supported with appropriate data analyses.

In the second summer, I plan to revise my initial research based on the feedback from my advisor as well as fellow scholars and present the findings of this project at the Canadian Psychological Association conference in June 2022. I believe that this scholarship would give me the opportunity to examine an under-explored area that has a lot of potential for further research in the field of youth criminal justice. My main goal for the second half of the program is to participate in a leadership experience with other scholars because I want to develop a new skill set that allows me to approach the question from a new perspective.

References

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