

Prevalence of mental disorders and associated variables among Ontario children who are permanent wards¹

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International research has reported that children in care are disproportionately represented in clinical populations receiving psychiatric services^{2,3,4} and those who have mental disorders are less likely to be reunited with parents than are other foster children.⁵ Therefore the rate of mental disorders among children who are permanent wards without access (i.e., children in provincial child welfare care who do not have rights of access to their biological parents) is especially important to understand since these children can only leave care via adoption. Otherwise, they spend the remainder of their childhoods in fostering arrangements before transitioning to adulthood. This study looked at the situation in Ontario, where the permanent ward population doubled during the decade ending in 2005⁶ while the rate of wards leaving care by adoption decreased.⁷

The method

Case files were reviewed from a random sample of 429 children in Ontario, Canada, who were permanent wards with no access to biological parents. Information taken from files included age, sex, mental disorder status, maltreatment experiences, service history (e.g., age at admission to care, current residential placement type) and permanency plans.

Key results

Mental disorders

The prevalence rate of mental disorders was 31.7% ($n=136$). Most children (65.7%) had only one mental disorder while 26.3% had at least two and the remainder three or more. The two most common mental disorders were “attention deficit hyperactivity disorder” (20.7%) and “mental retardation and pervasive developmental disorders” (7.5%). Boys were twice as likely to have a mental disorder as were girls.

Psychotropic medication

Twenty-eight percent of the 429 children had been prescribed psychotropic medications.

Multiple disabilities

The percentage of children with mental disorders who also had another category of disability was 49.3% ; most common were learning disabilities (17.6%), physical disabilities (14.7%), and Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (7.3%).

Maltreatment

Results indicated that 78.3% of children were suspected of or verified as having experienced maltreatment before entering care. About 9% experienced maltreatment during their time in care. Children with mental disorders were more likely to experience maltreatment during both time periods than were children without these disorders.

Permanency Plans

Children with mental disorders were about seven times less likely to have a permanency plan of adoption than were children without these disorders. They were almost three times more likely to be placed by Children's Aid Societies in privately operated residential care, such as group homes, and almost 10 times less likely to be living in a probationary adoption home. Although children with mental disorders were less likely to have a permanency plan of adoption than were children without mental disorders, only two variables were predictive of children's adoption plans: age on becoming a permanent ward and age at the time of the study.

Clinical Implications

The high rate of mental disorders among the children in the sample suggests an ongoing need for thorough evaluations and treatment of all children who are or become permanent wards of the state.

Enhanced psychiatric assessment and treatment should focus on older children who are admitted to, or remain in, the care of the state.

Limitation

This study reports children's diagnosed disorders and did not use other methods to confirm the diagnoses.

1. This information sheet is based on information contained in: Burge, P. (2007). Prevalence of mental disorders and associated service variables among Ontario children who are permanent wards. *Canadian Journal of Psychiatry*, 52, 305–314.
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4. Takayama, J., Bergman, A., & Connell, F. (1994). Children in foster care in the state of Washington: Health care utilization and expenditures. *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 271, 1850–1855.
5. Rosenberg, S. & Robinson, C. (2004). Out-of-home placement for young children with developmental and medical conditions. *Children and Youth Services Review*; 26, 711–723.
6. Personal communication with Gail Vandermeulen, Director of Standards and Special Projects, Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies, January 6, 2006.
7. Personal communication with Marie Bountrogianni, former Ontario Minister of Children and Youth Services, February 23, 2004.

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