

Prearrest Diversion: Addressing the SUD-Mental Illness Link

Catching Up With COSSAP, August 2021

The National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) reports that multiple national population surveys have found a correlation between mental illness and substance use disorder (SUD). In fact, about half of individuals who experience a mental illness during their lives will also experience an SUD and vice versa (NIDA, 2021). Research also has shown that 68 percent of drug offenders are rearrested within three years of release from prison. Illegal drug use increases the likelihood of continued involvement in criminal activity and correlates to a high rate of relapse and recidivism among drug-involved offenders.

Establishing treatment alternatives for individuals with SUD will create safer communities, allow individuals an opportunity to actively participate in their recovery, and provide a viable solution for drug-involved offenders who represent a large percentage of those involved in the criminal justice system. Gaining a better understanding of SUD and its correlation with mental illness, as well as exploring treatment alternatives, is critical because arrest does little to deter this population from committing crimes. This explains why many law enforcement agencies are willing to risk the familiar comfort of traditional programs by implementing prearrest diversion initiatives and outreach programs that offer alternatives to prosecution.

One example is the Charlotte-Mecklenburg, North Carolina, Police Department (CMPD). The CMPD has seen the value and effectiveness of major SUD treatment interventions that are used at different possible linkage points during criminal justice case processing, including diversion, jail, prison, and community supervision.

The CMPD's work goes beyond traditional policing into programming that educates young people on how to make better decisions, offers them life-changing experiences, and facilitates positive interactions with law enforcement. These programs have helped to reduce adolescent arrest, address

racial and ethnic disparities, and minimize the school-to-prison pipeline (STPP). Like many other law enforcement programs, the CMPD's diversion programs are designed for first-time offenders and employ graduated response levels within schools and law enforcement to address these issues.

The CMPD works closely with schools within the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School District and accepts juvenile referrals for youths aged 6 to 17 from patrol and school resource officers. After staff members receive a referral, an intake meeting is set up to administer an assessment, which helps staff members assign placement into one of five eight-hour life skill training sessions. Youth are tracked for rates of recidivism for up to 12 months after completing the program.

Since the program's inception in 2013, the CMPD has utilized a graduated response level that encourages schools to handle offenses first, then communicate with the police department before referring cases to the criminal justice system. This protocol allows each provider an opportunity not only to communicate but to achieve appropriate and immediate actions and outcomes for the affected individual. This method, which is similar to care coordination, has afforded the CMPD an outstanding record of having 86 percent of its referrals agree to services, a 90 percent completion rate, and a 90 percent non-reoffend rate. In addition, arrest rates for 6- to 17-year-olds have decreased by 27 percent, racial and ethnic disparities have decreased by 24 percent, and STPP incidences have decreased by 17 percent.

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The CMPD offers complementary programs, such as Cops CARE, which teaches youth the negative realities of gang involvement, and the Respect, Engage, Accountability, Character, Honesty (REACH) Academy, which builds positive relationships between participants and officers to promote personal and social responsibility through leadership opportunities and educational seminars.

Reference

National Institute on Drug Abuse (2021, April 13). "Part 1: The Connection Between Substance Use Disorders and Mental Illness." Retrieved June 11, 2021, from <https://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/research-reports/common-comorbidities-substance-use-disorders/part-1-connection-between-substance-use-disorders-mental-illness>.