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Medical Issues in Foster Youth Referred for Mental Health Treatment

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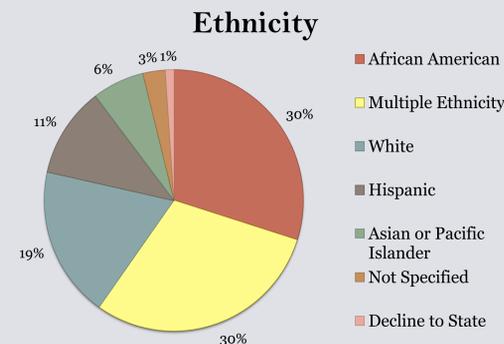
BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

- Children in foster care have higher rates of medical problems compared to those not in foster care.
- Health professionals typically have little or no training regarding issues specific to foster children and may not recognize problems or refer these children for appropriate care.
- The relationship between mental health and health problems among foster youth has not been adequately explored.
- Two-thirds of funds allocated for medical treatment of foster youth is spent on the 8% of children diagnosed or identified with psychotic disorders, neurologic conditions and other chronic medical diseases.
- The purpose of the study is to determine the medical conditions experienced by foster children referred for mental health treatment.

METHOD

Participants

- The intake forms completed for 107 foster youth referred for mental health treatment through a national non-profit agency were randomly selected from all forms completed between February, 2002 and July, 2012.
- 63% Female
- Mean Age = 15.74 years (SD = 7.7628)



METHOD

Measure

- Semi-structured intake form about patient demographics, reason for referral, symptoms, diagnosis, as well as biological parent and patient medical history.

Procedure

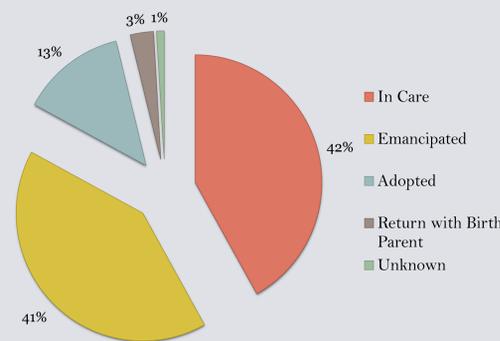
- Intake forms completed by staff of non-profit agency when referrer calls to refer a current or former foster youth for mental health treatment
- Completed intake forms emailed to research team as PDF files.
- PDFs of intake forms entered, coded, and analyzed by research team.

Analyses

- Intake form data was coded twice by trained research assistants using a coding scheme developed in prior pilot study work.
- Coding scheme included biological parent and patient questions regarding neurological, cardiovascular, cancer, injuries, sensory organ, respiratory, musculoskeletal, GI, infectious, pregnancy, substance abuse, and dental conditions.

RESULTS

Foster Care Status

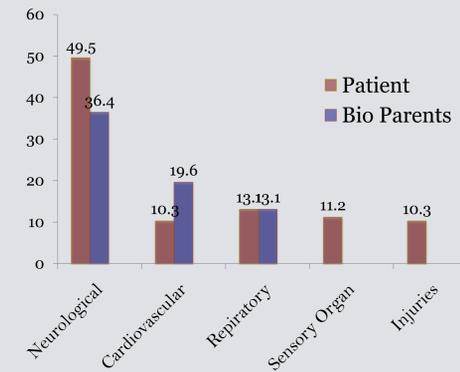


RESULTS

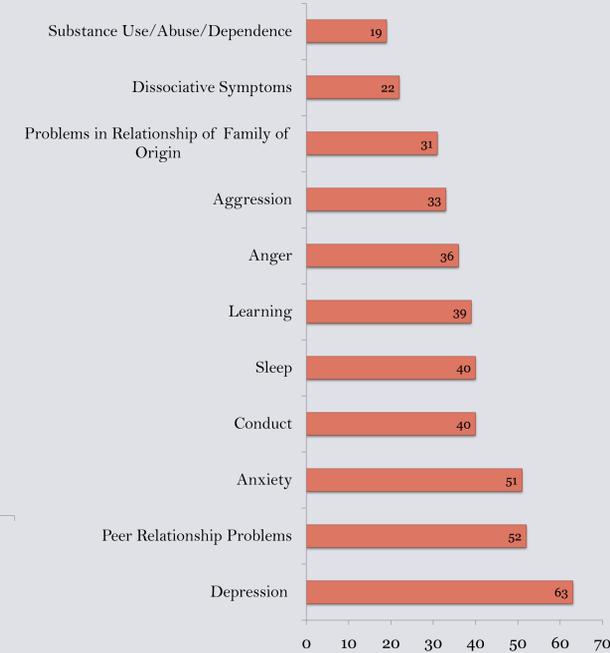
Reason for Referral

- Behavior Problems (50.5%)
- School Related Problems (47.7%)
- Relationship Problems (54.2%)
- Family Problems (35.5%)
- Emotional Difficulties (86.9%)

Patient vs. Biological Parent Medical Issues



Mental Health Symptoms Reported



Psychiatric Issue	Medical Issue				
	Neurological	Respiratory	Cardiovascular	Cancer	Injuries
Psychotic Thoughts + Behaviors	0.196*	-	-	0.193*	-
Aggression	0.305**	-	-	0.198*	0.223*
Sexual Problems	-	-	0.203*	0.329**	-
Hoarding Symptoms	-	0.270**	-	-	-
Dissociative Symptoms	-	-	-	0.257**	-
Self-Injurious Behavior	-	-	-	0.329**	-
Substance Abuse	-	-	-	0.288**	-
Legal Problems	-	-	-	0.266**	-

* p < 0.05
** p < 0.01

DISCUSSION

- This ethnically diverse group of foster youth referred for mental health treatment demonstrated a variety of mental health symptoms and health problems.
- Reported health problems in this sample of foster youth are similar to those occurring among low-income families.
- Referred youth experiencing psychotic thoughts and behaviors and/or aggression were more susceptible to neurological problems, while youth affected with hoarding symptoms reported more respiratory problems.
- Placement in foster care offers an opportunity to address all of the health care needs of this high-risk group of children; medical training programs should include education about common presenting mental and physical health problems of foster youth.
- Primary limitations of the current study include small sample size, potential bias of referrals, the lack of available medical records, and the use of a screening form designed for non-research purposes.
- Future research should explore the relationship between specific mental health symptoms and physical health problems and should compare referrer reports with medical records.

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