

Young offenders exhibit disastrous health profiles

December 10 2013, by Anne Rahilly



Young people serving time in youth detention or serving community-based orders have extremely high rates of substance dependence, poor mental health and engage in risky sexual behaviour, a new study has found.

Researchers from Murdoch Childrens Research Institute and the

University of Melbourne interviewed over 500 [young people](#) in custody or serving community based orders in Victoria between 2002 and 2003. The survey asked participants about their educational and vocational experiences, violence and [sexual assault](#), offence history, [family history](#) of [mental illness](#) and imprisonment and their substance use and own mental [health](#).

Researchers found that 34% of young people serving community based orders and 66% in youth detention were dependent on alcohol, cannabis, heroin, amphetamines or sedatives – the most common being cannabis. Those serving time in youth detention were significantly more likely to have ever injected a drug (48% compared with 13%). Rates of hazardous alcohol use were also high in both groups: 73% for young people serving community based orders and 82% for those in custody.

The researchers found that depression was common in both groups and many reported engaging in self-harm. In both groups, 29% reported having a family member with a history of mental illness. The majority reported having sex before 15 years of age, and around one in ten reported having had more than five sexual partners in the past six months.

Lead author Associate Professor Stuart Kinner said, "Although overall the health profile of those in custody was worse than that among young people serving community orders, the sheer number of young people serving community orders means that the total health burden is at least as high in this group."

A/Prof Kinner said the study highlights the need for health services to be scaled up for young people in custody and under supervision in the community.

"The links between substance use, poorly managed mental illness and

offending are well documented. Addressing the complex health needs of these young people therefore has the potential to not only improve their future, but also reduce the risk of reoffending – it's a win-win situation."

Senior author Professor George Patton said the findings of the study highlight a large population of young people who are likely to have considerable unmet need for coordinated [mental health](#), substance use and social services – particularly in the community.

"Young people in juvenile detention have disastrous health profile that costs them dearly in premature death and disability and the community in their reoffending. The health problems of young offenders are inseparable from their offending. These young people become caught in a vicious cycle in which substance abuse and mental disorders contribute directly and indirectly to their offending.

There is a compelling case for investment in both health and vocational training of these young people as they enter the justice system and crucially, as they return to the community. Recent innovations in monitoring the health of adult offenders should be extended to young offenders—including those serving community based orders—where the best opportunities for early intervention lie."

Provided by University of Melbourne

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