

# Ohio's diversion program effective in helping juvenile offenders with mental health disorders

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An evaluation of Ohio's Behavioral Health/Juvenile Justice (BHJJ) initiative in 11 counties by social work researchers at Case Western Reserve University found the program benefits most young offenders diverted from detention centers to community-based agencies to treat mental health issues, drug problems or both.

BHJJ is a program started 15 years ago at the request of Ohio juvenile court judges with help from the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services and the Ohio Department of Youth Services.

The program serves offenders 10 to 18 years old with [mental health issues](#) and substantial behavioral, cognitive and emotional problems. Many also have abused drugs and alcohol, have a history of violent or criminal behavior and have had encounters with various county agencies before appearing in juvenile court.

Researchers at the Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel School of Applied Social Sciences' Begun Center for Violence Prevention Research and Education analyzed information from caregivers, social workers and 2,545 young offenders who enrolled in the program between 2006 and 2013. Most showed improvements in functioning and decreases in future delinquency and symptoms related to trauma.

Based on the results from diagnostic assessments performed at

community [behavioral health](#) agencies, nearly 60 percent suffered from a mental health disorder, while 38 percent were diagnosed with both a mental health and substance abuse disorder.

For many, the encounter with the juvenile justice system was the first time they were screened for behavioral health problems, said Jeff M. Kretschmar, PhD, research assistant professor from the Begun Center.

Kretschmar is lead author of the online article, "Diverting Juvenile Justice-Involved Youth with Behavioral Health Issues from Detention: Preliminary Findings From Ohio's Behavioral Health Juvenile Justice (BHJJ) Initiative," in *Criminal Justice Policy Review*.

Their conclusion: Juvenile offenders can benefit from diversion programs through community agencies with services for [mental health problems](#) and substance abuse that they may not have received in a detention center.

The article presents an overview of BHJJ enrollees' characteristics and challenges to help court workers and judges match youths with the most appropriate and effective diversion service.

Kretschmar collaborated on the study with Begun Center researchers Fredrick Butcher, PhD, research associate; Daniel J. Flannery, PhD, director; and Mark I. Singer, PhD, deputy director. The research was funded by Ohio Department of Youth Services and the Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services (Grant number: 4AS3190).

Roughly two-thirds (67 percent) of the youth who had finished the program did so successfully. The next most common reason for terminating the program was due to some form of out-of-home placement (8 percent).

A review by researchers provides a snapshot of the youths in the program:

- Nearly six in 10 (58 percent) were male.
- Just over half (52 percent) were white.
- About a third had been charged with a felony in the prior 12 months to their enrollment in BHJJ.
- Some reported experiencing physical abuse (18 percent), sexual abuse (nearly 16 percent) and exposure to domestic violence (41 percent).
- Fifteen percent had previously attempted suicide; another 40 percent talked about it.
- Nearly 70 percent had a family history of [mental health disorder](#); 61 percent reported a family history of [substance abuse](#).

The researchers examined the variables that predicted two important outcomes: completing treatment successfully and engaging in future acts of delinquency.

They found that youth who started using alcohol and drugs before age 12 and who were using when they began the program were less likely to complete treatment successfully. They also discovered that youth diagnosed with both a mental health and substance use disorder were less likely to complete treatment successfully.

Kretschmar said previous research has found that youth with both [mental health](#) and substance use diagnoses have difficulties staying in treatment and are more likely to relapse.

Youth with earlier, more significant and more recent juvenile court involvement were more likely to be charged with acts of delinquency after involvement in the program. And youth with more complex substance use issues and those suspended or expelled from school before

their participation were more likely to commit a new juvenile crime.

**More information:** "Diverting Juvenile Justice-Involved Youth With Behavioral Health Issues From Detention: Preliminary Findings From Ohio's Behavioral Health Juvenile Justice (BHJJ) Initiative." *Criminal Justice Policy Review* December 17, 2014 0:0887403414560885v1-887403414560885.  
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Provided by Case Western Reserve University

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