Psychopathology of adolescent detained versus psychiatric inpatient females

Sander van Doorn a, Luces M.C. Jansen a,⁎, Robert R.J.M. Vermeiren a,b, Sannie M.J.J. Hamerlynck a, Theo A.H. Doreleijers a

a VU University Medical Centre, Dept. of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
b Curium-LUMC, Leiden University Medical Center, The Netherlands

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A B S T R A C T

Several studies have shown high rates of psychopathology among female adolescents in detention. Although rates of mental health problems have been called alarming, it is unknown whether mental health needs in females in juvenile justice differ substantially from those of females in mental health care. Therefore, this study compared adolescent females in detention with inpatient adolescent females. For this purpose, a sample of 256 detained females (mean age 15.4±1.3) was compared to 45 psychiatric inpatient females (mean age 15.8±1.4). Socio-demographic characteristics, mental health history and psychiatric problems were investigated using file-information and self-report questionnaires. Compared to detained females, inpatients more often showed internalizing problems and dissociation, whereas externalizing problems prevailed in girls in detention centers. Females in detention more often came from an ethnic minority group, while females in mental healthcare more often received mental healthcare previously and had parents with higher employment. This study confirms that mental health needs of girls in mental healthcare and in detention are high. However, non-mental health related factors were different as well – i.e. socio-economic factors – and are likely to influence the involvement with either service sector.

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1. Introduction

Over the past years, several studies have shown high rates of psychopathology among adolescents in detention. Even when excluding a diagnosis of conduct disorder (CD) – which includes criteria related to offending behavior – more than half of detained adolescents are diagnosed with a psychiatric disorder (Teplin et al., 2002; Vermeiren et al., 2006; Fazel et al., 2008). Particularly in detained girls, specific types of psychopathology – i.e. internalizing disorders – were shown to reach high levels (Fazel et al., 2008; Sevecke et al., 2008). In addition, Hamerlynck et al. (2009) found this to be equally true for Dutch adolescent girls with a civil judicial measure, those detained for status offences, and girls detained under penal law. As detention centers are not equipped to meet psychiatric needs, it is clinically relevant to investigate how mental health problems of detained girls differ from those of girls in psychiatric departments. Therefore, this study aimed at comparing adolescent females in detention with females in closed mental health departments.

Previous sparse research has shown high rates of psychopathology in both detained samples and adolescents in mental healthcare. Inconsistency of findings and diversity in study design, however, does not allow sound interpretation of clinical implications. In incarcerated females, rates of depression ranged from 9% to 36% and for PTSD from 7% to almost 50% (Cauffman et al., 1998; Ulzen and Hamilton, 1998; McCabe et al., 2002; Teplin et al., 2002; Dixon et al., 2004; Lederman et al., 2004; Ariga et al., 2008; Washburn et al., 2008; Karnik et al., 2009), while suicide attempts were described in up to 35% (Morris et al., 1995; Plattner et al., 2007). With regard to externalizing disorders, up to 21% of detained girls were shown to meet criteria for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) (McCabe et al., 2002; Teplin et al., 2002; Washburn et al., 2008), 40% for CD (Teplin et al., 2002; Washburn et al., 2008) and over 40% for substance use disorder (Morris et al., 1995; Ulzen and Hamilton, 1998; McCabe et al., 2002; Teplin et al., 2002; Washburn et al., 2008).

Surprisingly few studies have reported prevalence rates of psychiatric disorders of inpatient female adolescents studied by means of standardized assessment. This is particularly true when considering the most serious cases, those who undergo closed placement because of severe mental health problems. Existing sparse findings are further inconsistent, with depressive symptoms found in 13% to over 90% (Swart and Merskey, 1989; Frisk, 1999; Sourander and Turunen, 1999; Halloran et al., 2002), ADHD in 2.5% to 13% (Sourander and Turunen, 1999; Halloran et al., 2002), Oppositional defiant disorders (ODD) in 1.7% to nearly a third (Sourander and Turunen, 1999; Halloran et al., 2002) and CD in...
be imposed as an act of child protection, mostly when having committed a status offence. Of these girls, a total of 83% (mean age = 15.4, S.D. = 1.3) were placed with a civil measure, while 17% of girls (mean age = 16.4, S.D. = 1.6) were placed under penal law. Since previous research found both samples to show similar rates of psychopathology (Hamelryck et al., 2009), both will be studied together.
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