Research Snapshot

Addressing the gap between service need and delivery of child and youth mental health services

What is this research about?

There is a gap between need and delivery in Canada's child and youth mental health services. Current service delivery in Ontario is costly, fragmented, and difficult to navigate. The authors emphasized the need for ongoing innovation, development, and evaluation of public mental health policy. They proposed a vision: the establishment of demonstration and research sites focused on promoting service frameworks based on systems of care, public health policy, and resiliency approaches to support child and youth mental health. The authors also presented their approach to changing mental health service provision in Canada.

"Considering the demonstrated impact of mental health problems on social, emotional, cognitive, and educational functioning, it is of critical importance that we bring our resources to bear on the reconceptualization of mental health care for children and youth of Canada."

The authors noted two steps to achieving their vision. First, demonstration and research sites should be built in community schools within neighborhoods defined by presence of risk factors (e.g. poverty). Second, funding from local school boards, community agencies, charitable organizations, and universities needs to be secured.

What you need to know:

This paper explored the need for ongoing innovation, development, and evaluation of public mental health policy related to child and youth mental health services. Authors proposed a vision in which demonstration and research sites partner with public health policy approaches and provide support through research and evidence informed practice.

Demonstration and Research Sites

Policy change can be inefficient and dangerous without research-informed support and information. Demonstration and research sites provide opportunities for teams to develop empirically supported mental health information. Through research, education, and advocacy these sites can partner with policy makers to inform policy change. The goal is to provide accelerated research support to address the consequences of mental health policy, implementation, and practices. Success is dependent on collaboration between stakeholders including policy makers, health care providers, universities, and communities. This collaboration should be informed by a system of care frameworks, public health policy approaches, and resiliency approaches.

Systems of Care

A system of care is a philosophy that promotes collaboration of agencies and families to improve service delivery and health outcomes. Effective treatment must address the child and the conditions present in their environment to create individualized treatment plans. This is often referred to as a wraparound planning process. With a focus on a family's strengths and needs, wraparound is designed to increase the likelihood that appropriate supports are implemented, and sustained. This model is also described as an interconnected system of care.

Interventions must be targeted appropriately, guided by public health strategy, and based on collaboration between systems. An interconnected system of care is a relatively new model that emphasizes integrated programs at three levels. Universal promotion interventions target the entire population to promote wellness. Secondary prevention interventions are designed for after the onset of an identified concern or for groups with increased risk for mental health concerns. Tertiary treatments include individually designed intensive interventions.

Preventative Public Health Policy

A public health approach is valuable because it goes beyond addressing current mental health problems. It also focuses on prevention through engaging cross-sector partners to enhance and promote health. The crucial step of a public health approach is to gather data to drive a decision-making process. Data about youth mental health needs, assets, gaps, and goals help identify what to measure and how to best support communities.

Resiliency Approaches

There are many protective factors that can lead to positive developmental outcomes and increased resilience. The authors suggested that efforts increasing protective factors within families and communities can improve mental health. This requires a system of care encompassing collaborative services from both inside and outside the child's family.

How can you use this research?

This paper highlights the importance of developing collaborative and innovative solutions to address the gap in child and youth mental health services. Successful change to mental health public policy is dependent on continual exploration, innovation, and research within real world contexts. This can only be accomplished through collaboration between research sites, policy makers, mental health professionals, and the community. New ideas and practices can lead to innovative solutions in the children's mental health system. This collaboration must be informed by system of care frameworks, preventative public health approaches, and resiliency approaches.

Original Research Article:

For a complete description of the research and findings, please see the full research article:

Schwean, V., & Rodger, S. (2013). Children first: It's time to change! Mental health promotion, prevention, and treatment informed by public health, and resiliency approaches. *Canadian Journal of School Psychology*, *28*, 136-166.

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About this Summary: This summary was written by E. Robyn Masters, PhD Candidate at Western University. For further information about Western's Centre for School Mental Health, visit **www.edu.uwo.ca/csmh**.

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