

The Intersection of ADHD, Race, and Justice System Involvement

Sarah Jalbert, PhD^{1,2}

¹Institute for Community Health, Malden, MA

²University of Massachusetts, Boston, MA

BACKGROUND

- Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder is a prevalent behavioral health condition in the U.S.; an estimated 11 percent of parents of U.S. children between ages 4 and 17 reported that their children have been diagnosed with ADHD (Visser et al. 2013).
- ADHD diagnosis puts children at higher risk for a variety of negative life outcomes including significant academic impairment, increased risk of delinquency as well as negative impacts on social functioning and job attainment and retention as adults (Kent et al. 2011, Kuriyan et al. 2013, Sibley et al. 2011)
- Black and Latino/a/e children are less likely to receive ADHD diagnoses and less likely to receive high-quality treatment for ADHD, despite evidence that the disorder's prevalence across racial and ethnic identity groups.
- Black and Latino/a/e children with ADHD are also more likely to experience stigmatizing educational interventions and school discipline associated with the school to prison pipeline (Moody, 2016)
- Research has shown that people with ADHD are overrepresented in the U.S. prison system, with some studies indicating that up to a quarter of incarceration people have ADHD (Young et al. 2015).
- However, other research fails to demonstrate a direct causal connection between ADHD and crime (Unnever, Cullen, and Pratt 2003), indicating that other social factors likely contribute to incarceration outcomes for people with ADHD.

This study explores how ADHD affects the experiences of young people in school, how having ADHD might shape those experiences, and whether school experiences are related to subsequent justice system experiences.

STUDY DESIGN

MIXED METHODS approach to investigate ADHD's influence on the experiences of young BIPOC people in and out of school, the impact of ADHD on social bonds with school and the community, and the influence of weakened social bonds on justice system outcomes.



QUALITATIVE: Interviews with 21 young justice-involved men, many of whom have an ADHD diagnosis, to explore their experiences with school, ADHD, the justice system, and their bonds to social institutions.



QUANTITATIVE: analysis of nationally representative survey of people in state and Federal prisons to test whether ADHD and the strength of social bonds predict early involvement in the justice system, and whether early justice system involvement varies by race and ADHD diagnosis.

QUALITATIVE RESULTS

- Schools were a source of disconnection and stigma for young BIPOC people with ADHD
- Young men either dropped out of school, or were pushed out to alternative schools or no school.
- When young men tried to re-engage with school, they were often turned away

"I was like, furious for that cause I, I wanted to actually go to school that senior year. I really was planning on doing like, the whole year...I just didn't even try anymore. I just got super depressed after."

"My IEP worker would always tell me finish this year off good and next year we'll try to see if we can get you into a public school. I don't think she ever even tried to be honest. I don't think she cared."

- Most young men with ADHD who had justice system contact reported early incarceration

"Oh man. I tell you, [jail] it's very stressful. Especially when you're like a young man and you've got so much time ahead of you. You just sit there and you're like, when you're in those cuffs or that jumpsuit, or the uniform they give you in there, you just, you deprive in value."

- Few young men with ADHD reported direct experiences with interpersonal racism
- However, young men indicated they felt deprivation and a general sense of discrimination, especially in schools

"I felt like being Latino it made the community, viewed as a place that was undeserving, you know? Okay. Because I used to, I used to see like the neighboring cities around them. They're not full of Latinos. They're, they're more white, you know? But they had everything that we didn't in the schools, better funding, everything."

QUANTITATIVE RESULTS

- Twenty-four percent of incarcerated people in the State and Federal prison system report having an ADHD diagnosis.
- Significantly more white incarcerated people (31%) report having ADHD than Black (20%) and Latino/a/e/ (18.5%) incarcerated people.
- Latino/a/e incarcerated people were arrested 3.4 years earlier if they had ADHD.
- White incarcerated people with ADHD had a predicted age of first arrest two years earlier than white inmates without ADHD; Black incarcerated people with ADHD were only predicted to be arrested approximately 6 months earlier if they had ADHD.
- Incarcerated people with ADHD of all racial/ethnic identities had significantly weaker social bonds
- For incarcerated people with already weak social bonds, the additive effect of ADHD was significant but small

CONCLUSIONS

- ADHD is prevalent among incarcerated people of all races, but is most frequently diagnosed in white inmates
- For Black incarcerated people, ADHD diagnosis had minimal impact on age of first arrest, likely because disproportionate incarceration due to racism leads to already early arrest and incarceration outcomes
- Equitable access to early diagnosis and treatment for ADHD, combined with inclusive special education practices, would likely improve educational and justice system outcomes for young BIPOC people with ADHD