Introduction

• Individuals in helping professions must be the forefront of helping improve the health and well-being of formerly incarcerated youth and stemming the tide of these individuals returning to prison after release.

• Disparate rates of reincarceration for African American and Latino minorities (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2007) and an increasingly diverse US population requires attention to effective strategies for inhibiting incarceration and re-arrest.

• The aims of this longitudinal research were three-fold. Key research questions include:
  1. How well does a positive youth development (PYD) model predict re-arrest, where PYD constructs of competence, character, and connection inhibit mental health and substance use issues?
  2. In what ways does participation in the treatment group of the Health Link program impact re-arrest, when controlling for other research-informed predictors of recidivism?
  3. How stable were constructs over time including a self-medication pathway where mental health issues predicted substance use issues?

Sample

• This study used data collected in the 1997-2002 evaluation of the Health Link Program. The Health Link program was established to help reduce substance abuse among individuals returning from Riker’s Island in New York City.

• Permission was given by the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR) to access data from study number 3976. All necessary confidentiality agreements were made with an understanding of the requirements of handling and analyzing sensitive data.

• The full sample in the dataset included 1046 cases of all ages and gender. The focus of this study was adolescent males.

• The sample study for analyses included 527 males.

Key Definitions: PYD Constructs

• Competence has been defined as a “positive view of one’s actions in domain-specific areas including academic, cognitive, and vocational (Jelicic, 2007).”

• Character has been defined as “respect for societal and cultural rules, possession of standards for correct behaviors, a sense of right and wrong (morality), and loyalty” (Jelicic, 2007). Character is an attempt to quantify pro-social behaviors and attitudes.

• Connection has been described as “positive bonds with people and institutions that are reflected in bidirectional exchanges between the individual and peer, family, school, and community in which both parties contribute to the relationship” (Jelicic et al., 2001).

Results

Analyses

• Statistical models were analyzed using structural equation modeling (SEM) with the outcome modeled as continuous for the single-time point models and categorical for the full-period model.

• MLM and WLSMV estimates were used to account for non-normal data with continuous and categorical outcomes respectively.

• Analyses were completed using Mplus 5.1 (Muthen and Muthen, 2008)

Discussion

• The full conceptual model fit the data well and supported many of the a priori hypothesized relationships among variables. However, the full model (HS) fit less well in comparison to a model constructed of predictions of recidivism (P1).

• Of the 10 possible direct effects, PYD constructs were significant predictors in 6 pathways with mental health or substance issues across time points.

• Overall, the risk inhibiting impacts of good character and positive connection were similar to prior literature. But, of the PYD constructs, connection was the most robust and pervasive in the model with important links to both mental health and substance use issues.

• Study results suggested two linked but divergent paths among the study sample that may have corresponded to differences in internalizing and externalizing behaviors.

• Most clearly, results suggested that in the sample individuals were able to address their mental health issues more successfully than individuals were able to address substance use issues.

• These relationships also suggest the enduring importance of supportive and prosocial relationships, a core tenet of prior research on positive youth development (Samer & Benson, 2003) as well as a key factor for African American (i.e., supportive adults) and Latino youth cultures (i.e., family cohesion). Future research can examine differences across ethnicity.

• These findings help illustrate the concerns expressed by Both (2008) that it is important to look outside of mental health and substance use toward development-oriented processes that facilitate well-being and inhibited risk with youth involved with the juvenile justice system.

Limitations and Strengths

• Several limitations exist that may impact validity and reliability. Validity may be impacted by inconsistent measures for PYD constructs between Time 1 and Time 2 and limited robustness for PYD constructs due to the use of proxies based on secondary data analyses.

• Different aspects of the constructs were measured and thus the model may have suppressed the magnitude or changed the nature of the relationship between constructs measured (e.g., Time 1 and Time 2 constructs were largely significant) and in the expected direction.

• The PYD constructs were also not based on established validated scales. However, the variables were consistent with the definitions and meanings attributed to the construct in the literature.

• The strengths of this study include explicit conceptual model articulated a priori that integrated several theoretical models including hypothesized relationships based on prior research literature. This, was a research informed confirmatory model.

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