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Substance abuse and childhood trauma experiences: Comparison between incarcerated and non-incarcerated youth

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Abstract

Problem statement: Increase involvement of youth in substance abuse has been a major issue internationally. Various studies have been conducted to explore the risk factors, which mostly focus on their childhood trauma experiences.

Research questions: What is the prevalence of substance abuse and childhood trauma experiences among incarcerated youth? What is the prevalence of substance abuse and childhood trauma experiences among non-incarcerated youth? Is there difference between the two? Are childhood trauma experiences significantly associated with substance abuse?

Purpose of the study: To compare the prevalence of substance abuse and childhood trauma experiences between incarcerated and non-incarcerated youth, and to examine the association between substance abuse and childhood trauma experiences among the youth.

Research method: A cross-sectional study was designed using two psychometric instruments namely Simple Screening Instrument for Alcohol and Other Drugs, and Childhood Trauma Questionnaire. Purposive-selective sampling method was used. In total, 765 youths (123 incarcerated, 642 non-incarcerated) were involved in the study. The data were analysed using statistical software. Independent *t*-test and regression analysis were performed to analyse the data.

Findings: Both incarcerated boys and girls had higher prevalence of substance abuse compared with non-incarcerated groups, which was confirmed by independent *t*-test ($p < .001$). Significant more incarcerated boys and girls had experienced childhood traumas compared to non-incarcerated. Childhood trauma experiences significantly contribute to substance abuse among incarcerated girls ($p < .05$), but not to incarcerated boys ($p > .05$).

Conclusion: The prevalence of substance abuse and childhood trauma experiences are higher among incarcerated youth compared to the non-incarcerated youth. In addition, childhood trauma experiences significantly contribute to substance abuse among incarcerated girls. The findings of this study are very useful to provide an empirical knowledge towards a better rehabilitation program design for incarcerated youth.

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Keywords: Substance abuse; childhood trauma experiences; incarcerated youth; non-incarcerated youth.

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1. Introduction

Substance abuse is one of the most common psychiatric as well as social problems present in any existing society in the world. It deserves to be called a global threat. Since the beginning of substance use, various social problems related to substance especially drugs have emerged (Abrantes, Hoffmann, & Anton, 2005; Lennings, Kenny, & Nelson, 2006; Veysey & Hamilton, 2007). These problems include increase in violent incident and criminal offences. The growing trend of prison population all over the world, particularly among women and juvenile, is strongly related to the existence of substance abuse (Willis & Rushforth, 2003; Abrantes et al., 2005; Lennings et al., 2006).

Increase involvement of youth in substance abuse has been a major issue internationally. Other than increase in the number of youth being incarcerated and detained, various social problems related to substance abuse among the youth have been evidenced in the recent decade (e.g., Abrantes et al., 2005; Snyder & Sickmund, 2006). Vandalism, drop-out of school, and prostitution are examples of common social problems that have been observed among substance-abusing youth these days (Brawn & Roe-Sepowitz, 2008; Schubert, Mulvey, & Glasheen, 2011). Besides, involvement in more serious crimes such as armed robbery and murder is increasing and these crimes are strongly related to their association with substance abuse (Dixon, Howie, & Starling, 2005; Hagelstam & Häkkinen, 2006; Plattner et al., 2012).

Various studies have been conducted to explore the risk factors of substance abuse among youth (e.g., Abrantes et al., 2005; Dixon et al., 2005; Prichard & Payne, 2005). Among the most common risk factors related to substance abuse among youth are childhood trauma experiences, which refer to experiences of various types of maltreatment before 18 years old or lower (Bernstein et al., 2003), depending on individual country's definition of children. In Malaysia, a child is defined as a person whose age is less than 18 years old (Act 611 - Child Act 2001, Laws of Malaysia). Types of maltreatment include abuses and negligence. These maltreatments are suggested to trigger either direct use of substance as a coping method to alleviate the pain of being maltreated (Dixon et al., 2005), or indirectly by inducing criminal lifestyle that mediates contact with substance use (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006; Brawn & Roe-Sepowitz, 2008). The knowledge on specific roles of childhood trauma experiences towards substance abuse among incarcerated youth, however, is scarce and needs more exploration, particularly in comparison with free-living youth. Thus, the research questions of the current study are:

- What is the prevalence of substance abuse and childhood trauma experiences among incarcerated youth compared to non-incarcerated youth?
- Do childhood trauma experiences significantly associated with substance abuse?

The objectives of this study are to compare the prevalence of substance abuse and childhood trauma experiences among incarcerated and non-incarcerated youth, and to examine the association between substance abuse and childhood trauma experiences among the youth.

2. Methodology

2.1. Participants

There were four groups of participants: incarcerated boys, incarcerated girls, non-incarcerated boys, and non-incarcerated girls. The sampling frame for the incarcerated groups was a detention school under the administration of the Malaysian Prison Department in Peninsular Malaysia. Non-incarcerated groups consisted of free-living youth who resided in and originated from the Peninsular Malaysia. The number of participants was calculated based on two-proportion formula using statistical software. Thus, the required numbers were 71 participants for incarcerated boys, 58 participants for incarcerated girls, 354 participants for non-incarcerated

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