Multiple Service Use: The impact of consistency in service quality for vulnerable youth

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ABSTRACT

Little is known about the way in which variations in service quality influence outcomes when youth are clients of more than one service system. This article reports on a study of 1,210 adolescents (aged 13–17 years), half were concurrent clients of two or more services and half were not involved in two or more services. Youth completed a self-report questionnaire administered by a trained interviewer. It was hypothesized that youth reporting two positive service experiences would report lower risks, higher resilience, and better outcomes than youth reporting inconsistent or two negative service experiences and that their resilience, risks, and outcomes would be similar to those of youth not involved in two or more services. MANCOVA was used to determine the relationship among service quality and resilience, risk, and outcomes with four covariates that assessed family and neighborhood environments, history of abuse and neglect, and chronic need. Results indicate that service quality had an effect on resilience, risks, and outcomes. These relationships were mediated quite strongly by the influence of the risks youth faced in their neighborhoods and to a lesser extent by the other three covariates. Of the three dependent variables, risk appeared to be the most consistently influenced by all the covariates, and it also differentiated service experience groups. Results point to the importance of services developing strategies to effectively address risks confronted by youth and also to ensure that when more than one service is involved with youth, consistency in service delivery is achieved.

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Introduction

Little attention has been given to the combined impact of interventions from multiple service systems (e.g., child welfare, mental health, special education, juvenile corrections) on vulnerable youth despite the fact that youth with the most complex needs and the highest risks are typically clients of more than one service system (Ungar, Liebenberg, Dudding, Armstrong, & Van de Vijver, 2013). Berzin (2010) makes a case for more attention to be paid to the complex nature of the transition through adolescence for youth who are clients in multiple service systems. She also argues for research that reaches "beyond system classifications toward broader definitions of risk that more adequately portray youth experience" (p. 487). Others have drawn attention to the fact that youth concurrently involved in more than one service system face heightened risks across a broad spectrum of developmental outcomes and generally do not achieve better outcomes despite the larger volume of services they receive (Garland, Aarons, Brown, Wood, & Hough, 2003; Haapasalo, 2000; Harpaz-Rotem, Berkowitz, Marans, Murphy, & Rosenheck, 2008; Hazen, Hough, Landsverk, & Wood, 2004; Kroll et al., 2002; Loeber, Farrington, Stouthamer-Loeber, & Van Kammen, 1998).

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It is not clear whether multiple system involvement enhances outcomes for youth who face significant levels of risk or makes it more difficult for them to chart a safe course through adolescence and into adulthood. The present study investigates the connection between the quality of service experiences within and across service systems and levels of risk, resilience, and outcomes taking account of the role of ecological variables (such as the neighborhood and family environment), history of abuse and neglect, and chronic need.

Ecological theory and service delivery

Ecological theories posit that protective resources in one area can offset the impact of risks in other areas (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). In this regard, service involvement is potentially a developmental asset available to vulnerable youth, possibly mitigating these risks and enhancing youth capacity to achieve good outcomes (Gilligan, 2004; Mitchell, 2011). It could be argued that the greater the number of services involved in vulnerable lives, the better the outcomes are likely to be. However, recent research (Ungar, Liebenberg et al., 2013) raises questions about the extent to which more services actually contribute to better outcomes for youth, thus highlighting the need to examine the link between the nature of service experiences and outcomes when more than one service provider or service system is involved in a young person's life.

Indeed, there is evidence that rather than promoting positive outcomes, involvement in more than one service system is related to higher risk and poorer outcomes (Garland et al., 2003; Hazen et al., 2004). If that is the case, it may mean that multiple service engagement adds to, rather than diminishes, the burden of risk faced by youth with complex needs. Alternatively, it might be that youth who become involved with more than one service provider have been exposed to higher levels of risk, present greater challenges to service providers, and that their multiple service engagement reflects a reduced capacity on the adolescent's part to engage successfully with service providers. Although this may be the case, studies of service satisfaction suggest that the better services are at meeting the needs of their clients, the more likely clients are to make and sustain change (Duncan, Miller, & Sparks, 2004). In other words, we cannot attribute poor outcomes to the reluctance of youth to engage in interventions unless quality is consistently high and services are provided in ways that are meaningful to youth.

It has been observed that the latent capacities and individual characteristics of youth explain only a small amount of the variance in outcomes among service users (Cicchetti, 2010; Sroufe, Egeland, Carlson, & Collins, 2005). Service quality and fit across all service systems, including mandated providers in child welfare and juvenile corrections, may influence outcomes more than individual qualities of the client (DuMont, Widom, & Czaja, 2007). Research has shown that the relationship between the nature of youth need and the type of services they receive is not always straightforward and that a wide range of factors in addition to the nature of youth need are likely to predict service response (Dodge, Murphy, O'Donnell, & Christopoulos, 2009; National Research Council & Institute of Medicine, 2009; Santisteban & Mena, 2009; Skovdal & Campbell, 2010; Swenson, Henggeler, Taylor, & Addison, 2009). Rather than being attributable to individual failings or case complexity, researchers are beginning to observe that when vulnerable populations are provided with appropriate resources and supports good outcomes can be achieved irrespective of personal characteristics of the individuals concerned (DuMont et al., 2007). Indeed, evidence is emerging that ecological approaches to the provision of support achieve the best outcomes for youth and this suggests that changes to the environment around vulnerable youth (including, inter alia, services) hold important potential for creating change (Betancourt et al., 2010; Browne et al., 2001; Obrist, Pfeiffer, & Henley, 2010; Saewyc & Edinburgh, 2010). The potential of multiple services to promote the achievement of change have not, to date, been systematically examined. This study seeks to address this important component of service delivery.

Given that the youth facing the most risk are known to be concurrent clients of more than one service system including child welfare, mental health, special education, and juvenile corrections (Garland et al., 2003; Hazen et al., 2004) services constitute a key part of the social ecology of vulnerable youth. Although it may be obvious that services would affect the potential for resilience among vulnerable youth, the use of multiple services is seldom discussed in studies of resilience. If the focus of service delivery is on risk mitigation and the support of positive change, consistent and integrated service delivery would appear to have much to offer in terms of improving the likelihood of good outcomes.

The issue of service quality, however, is complicated, particularly when considered across the spectrum of service systems that typically become involved with vulnerable youth spanning as they do the welfare, corrections, education, and mental health sectors. Recent research (Ungar, Liebenberg et al., 2013) has found that increased resilience and better outcomes are achieved when youth report that services are respectful and provide them with opportunities to exercise personal agency during treatment. These components of service delivery – respect and agency – have parallels with a positive youth development orientation to practice (Urban, Lewin-Bizan, & Lerner, 2009). Given the important developmental work in which adolescents are engaged with regard to identity and growing independence, it could be argued that when practitioners intentionally adopt such approaches there is likely to be a greater chance of success. For this reason, the service quality measure selected for this research assessed the extent to which services were experienced by youth as respectful and as encouraging their sense of agency.

The present study addresses the gap in knowledge concerning the ways in which services from more than one service system (child welfare, juvenile corrections, educational services additional to mainstream classroom programing and mental health) delivered to vulnerable youth intersect and documents the relationship between consistent service quality and outcomes (Berzin, 2010). We are particularly interested in understanding the way that involvement with multiple services across a number of service systems influences outcomes for youth who are exposed to large amounts of risk, who face