

Abstract

What supports do juvenile offenders have available to them while they are incarcerated and are these supports helpful or impactful on the wellbeing of these youth? If incarcerated youth have social support, whether it be family or non-family, they should show lower levels of mental health issues. The Pathways to Desistance Study looked at serious adolescent offenders as they transition to adulthood and out of crime. Incarcerated youth were screened for several different mental health issues, including anxiety, depression and hostility, as well as being screened for systems of social support. The present study aimed to examine how social supports affect mental health symptoms in incarcerated youth. Pathways to Desistance was a multi-site, collaborative study that involved 1,354 incarcerated youth between Arizona and Pennsylvania gathering data via surveys and interviews. The measures used were Caring Adult and the Brief Symptom Inventory. Overall, incarcerated youth without depressive symptoms and without anxiety symptoms had higher levels of family social support. However, incarcerated youth with non-family social support had higher scores with hostility symptoms than without hostility symptoms. The research implications of these findings support previous research and provide an insight into specific mental health issues.

Introduction

Significance of Study

- Approximately 60,000 youth under age 18 are incarcerated across the U.S. in juvenile jails and prisons.
- Up to eighty percent of juvenile offenders are experiencing a mental health problem while they are incarcerated.

Purpose

- To identify positive social supports that help decrease mental health problems in incarcerated youth.

Research Question

- Among juvenile offenders what is the relationship between social supports and mental health issues?

Hypothesis

- Higher levels of social support will be associated with lower levels of mental health issues.

Literature Review

Mental Illness In Incarcerated Youth

- Youth who are mentally ill appear to be incarcerated at higher rates. They have higher rates of mental illness than youth who receive hospitalization or community mental health services.

Effects of Social Supports

- Family and peers with antisocial backgrounds have an impact on juvenile offenders antisocial behavior.
- Juvenile offenders anxiety, depression, impulsivity and compliance are affected by home and school environments.
- If the youth have positive family engagement and support the better their mental health will be.

Significance to Social Welfare

- It is important to identify and intervene with these youth who have been incarcerated to prevent them from becoming chronic adult criminals, and to help their communities heal.

Limitations & Gaps

- It is difficult to truly extrapolate the scope of the problem of mental illness in incarcerated youth when the previous research has such small sample sizes.

Methodology

Research Design and Data Collection Procedures

- The current study is a secondary analysis of the data from Pathways to Desistance: A Study of Serious Adolescent Offenders as they Transition to Adulthood and Out of Crime.
- The design of the original study was multi-site, collaborative and longitudinal geared was to identify patterns of how serious adolescent offenders stop antisocial activity.
- Data was collected by the investigators at the University of Pittsburgh, Arizona State University, and Temple University.
- Data were collected at participants' homes, in libraries (or other public places), or in facilities.
- Data collection was done via computer assisted interview, on a laptop with trained interviewers reading each item aloud, and to ensure privacy participants could enter their responses to questions on a keypad.

Sample and Sampling Method

- Participants were serious adolescent offenders at least fourteen-years-old and under eighteen-years-old at the time of committing offense.
 - There were 1,354 participants gathered from two sites which were Maricopa County, Phoenix, Arizona (*n* = 654) and Philadelphia County, Pennsylvania (*n* = 700).
- The sample was recruited over a twenty-sixth month period from November, 2000 to January, 2003. Individuals were recruited in the juvenile and adult court systems in Maricopa County, AZ and Philadelphia, PA.

Measures

- Social support of caring adults in juvenile offenders lives was assessed across eight domains by asking the adolescents to identify the total number of supportive adults in the their life.
- The Brief Symptom Inventory is a measure where youth rate the extent to which they have been bothered by various symptoms over the past week via a 53 item self report from zero being not at all, to four equating extremely
- Symptoms were analyzed via a confirmatory factor analysis.
- Specific mental health issues observed were depression, anxiety, and hostility.

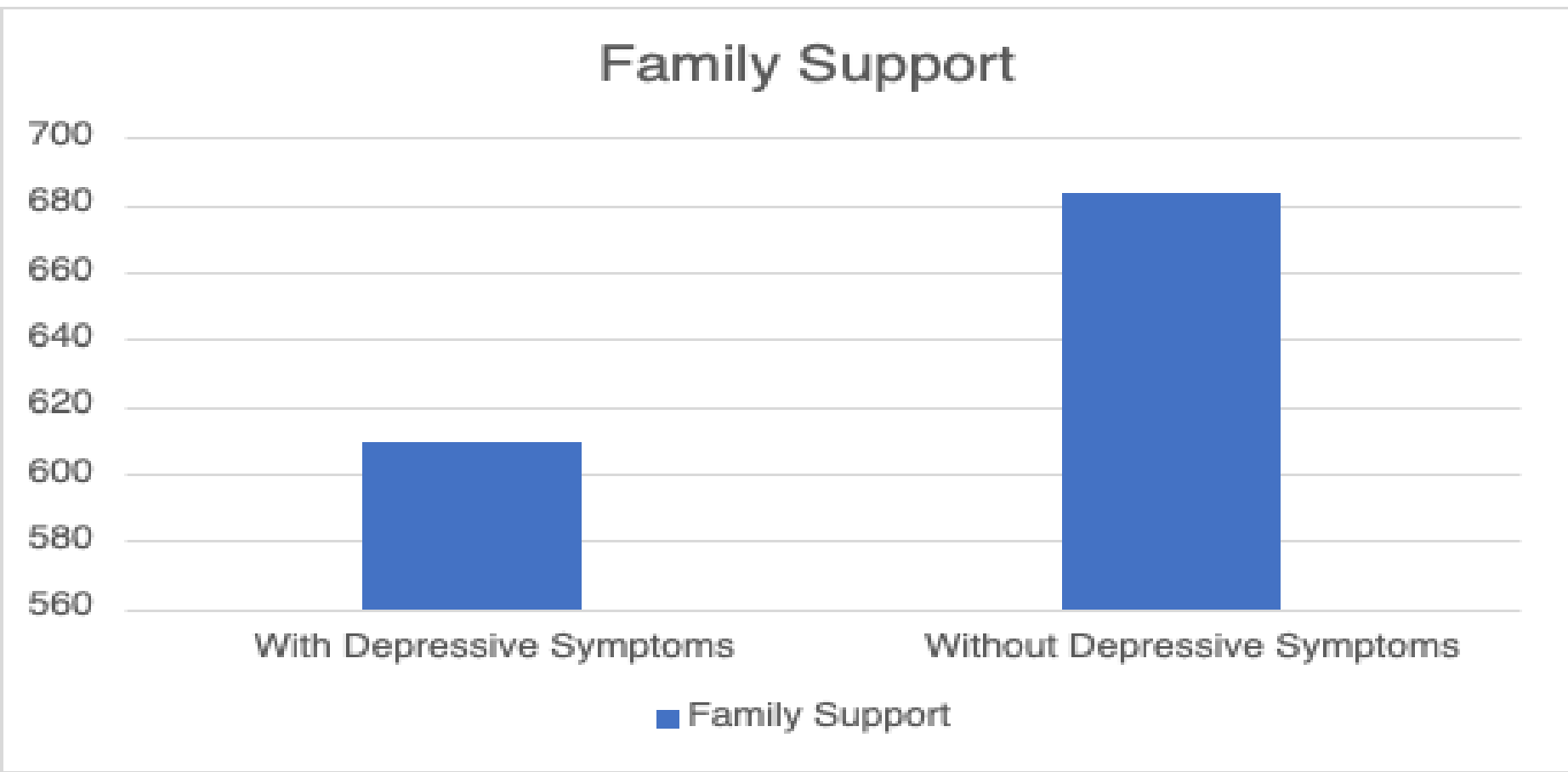
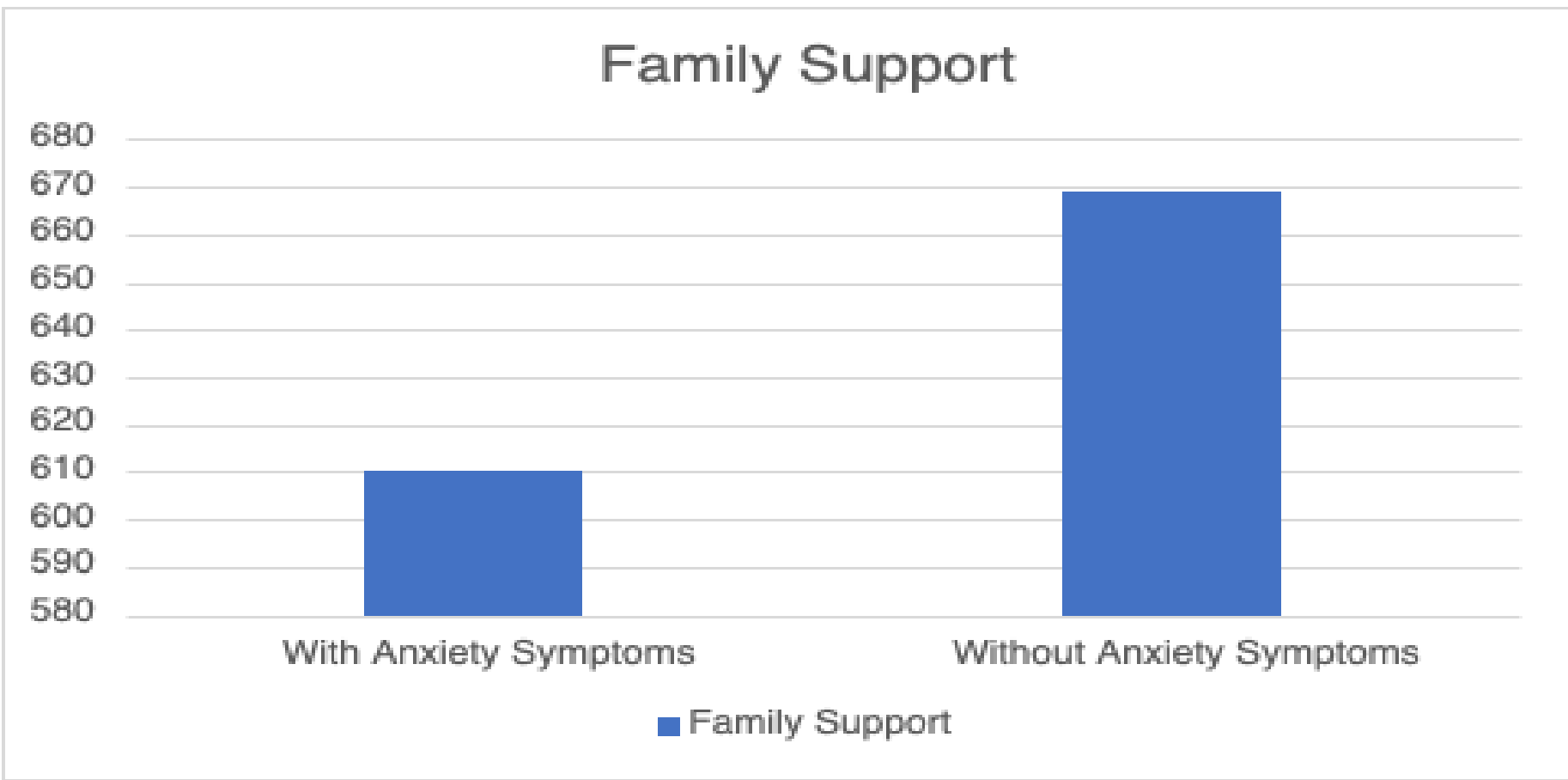
Results

Statistical Analysis

- A Mann-Whitney U analysis tested differences in mean level of family, non-family and total social support between participants with and without depressive symptoms, anxiety symptoms and hostility symptoms.

Inferential Analysis

- Youth with depressive symptoms (*Mean rank* = 609.46) had significantly lower amounts of family social support than those without depressive symptoms (*Mean rank* = 683.83, *U* = 146485.50, *p* < .001).
- Youth with depressive symptoms (*Mean rank* = 645.10) had significantly higher non-family social support than those without depressive symptoms (*Mean rank* = 599.21; *U* = 178132.50, *p* < .05).
- Youth with anxiety symptoms (*Mean Rank*= 610.12) had significantly lower amounts of family social support than those without anxiety symptoms (*Mean Rank* = 668.77, *U* = 167315.50, *p* < .05).
- Youth with anxiety symptoms (*Mean Rank* = 658.28) had significantly higher non-family social support than those without anxiety symptoms (*Mean Rank* = 584.81, *U* = 205939.50, *p* < .001).
- Youth with anxiety symptoms (*Mean Rank* = 606.38) had significantly lower total number of adults mentioned for social support than those without depressive symptoms (*Mean Rank* = 653.37, *U* =166221.00, *p* < .05)
- Youth with hostility symptoms (*Mean Rank* = 651.30) had significantly higher non-family social support than those without hostility symptoms (*Mean Rank* = 567.74, *U* = 163032.50, *p* < .001).



Discussion

Interpretation of Findings

- The findings of this research are consistent with previous research conducted.
- The incarcerated youth had one or more mental health symptoms which is related to higher rates of poor psychological adjustment.
- Higher levels of family social support was observed more for incarcerated youth without depressive or anxiety symptoms.
- The more positive parental monitoring there is as well as family cohesion there will likely be positive social adjustments in the incarcerated youth, and this can be seen as an explanation as to why with more family social support there were lower reports of anxiety and depression in the incarcerated youth.

Implications for Research, Practice and Policy

- The findings of family social support resulting in higher reports of incarcerated youth without anxious or depressive symptoms are important for social work practice.
- Social workers need to know all of the factors impacting their clients, which include non-family and family support, so that they can help develop treatment plans that will be successful for improving the youths mental health.
- The implications of the major findings for future research will support how family benefits and is a protective factor for incarcerated youth and their mental health while non-family support has that opposite effect.

Strengths and Limitations

- Strengths include the amount of time spent to collect data from participants including multiple interviews. By having multiple interviews, more accurate information was gained to provide a clear picture of mental health symptoms and support the incarcerated youth.
- The limitations for this research include a limited sample size, a lack of diversity, and a small age group.

Conclusion

- The study’s results implicate that having family social support reduces anxiety and depressive symptoms in incarcerated youth while having non-family social support results in anxiety, depressive, and hostility symptoms. These findings contribute to the existing literature by reinforcing how important family support is for incarcerated youth’s mental health.

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