

Developmental Disabilities in Ontario's Criminal Justice and Forensic Mental Health Systems: Using Data to Tell the Story

What is the research about?

In “*Nowhere to Turn*”¹ the Ontario Ombudsman described significant system gaps leading to adults with developmental disabilities being served in either the criminal justice or forensic inpatient mental health system, and challenges encountered within those settings.

We have had no data showing how big an issue this is in Ontario, which means that service providers and policy makers cannot make evidence-based decisions regarding appropriate services, strategies, and policies to support these individuals.

Our project addresses this gap by studying the profiles of people with developmental disabilities using existing data from four sectors of the Ontario criminal justice and forensic mental health systems: federal and provincial correctional facilities, forensic inpatient mental health beds, and community mental health programs.

What did the researchers do?

This study was comprised of four unique projects. The first three used linked administrative health data housed at ICES to identify people with developmental disabilities. The health data were linked to external data from federal and provincial corrections and forensic inpatient mental health settings. For these projects, a look back was completed to see if a diagnosis of developmental disability was recorded in available data using diagnostic codes from the International Classification of Disease and the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. The fourth project used data housed at the Canadian Mental Health Association Toronto to identify individuals with developmental disabilities, which were collected through assessments of clients of community mental health programs across the province.

To allow comparability, the team used data from similar time frames to address the same questions, with as similar variables and definitions as possible.

For each sector, study goals were as follows:

What you need to know

There is concern that there are many adults with developmental disabilities in the Ontario criminal justice and forensic mental health systems. These individuals have many physical and mental health issues and use high rates of health care. More attention is needed on how best to support these individuals before, during and after involvement with the criminal justice and forensic mental health systems.

1. Estimate the number of people identified as having a developmental disability.
2. Describe the sociodemographic and clinical characteristics of people with developmental disabilities, compared to other people in the same sector.
3. Describe involvement in the criminal justice or forensic mental health system, as well as subsequent health care use, of people with developmental disabilities compared to other people in the same sector.
4. Identify similarities and differences between people with and without developmental disabilities across the four sectors.

What did the researchers find?

In all four sectors, people with developmental disabilities were overrepresented, compared to their prevalence (0.7% – 0.9%) in the general population. Prevalence was highest among forensic inpatients (17%), followed by community mental health justice programs (8%), provincial (2%) and federal (2%) correctional facilities. As well, we found that people with developmental disabilities, compared to those without, were younger (in three sectors), lived in the poorest neighbourhoods, had more physical and psychiatric illness, and used more health care services.

¹Dubé, P. *Nowhere to Turn: Investigation into the Ministry of Community and Social Services' Response to Situations of Crisis Involving Adults with Developmental Disabilities*. Toronto, ON: Ombudsman Ontario; 2016. Accessed November 15, 2018 at <https://www.ombudsman.on.ca/resources/reports-and-case-summaries/reports-on-investigations/2016/nowhere-to-turn>.

H-CARDD snapshot

How can you use this research?

Our finding that people with developmental disabilities are overrepresented in each of these sectors shows that we need to pay more attention to how we best support them before, during and after involvement with the criminal justice and forensic mental health systems. We can learn important lessons from the existing data we have about who these people are, and some of their health needs, but there is also a need for more research on the factors leading to the current situation, as well as potential solutions.

- 1) Prior to involvement, preventative community supports are needed with the goal of diverting people with developmental disabilities from entering the criminal justice and forensic mental health systems.
- 2) During involvement, availability of tailored developmental disability services and supports, improved communication, and education and training of forensic mental health and criminal justice officials are required.
- 3) Following involvement, investment in services and supports when transitioning out of the system may help reduce the likelihood of re-entry as well as high cost emergency health care use.

I HAVE A WORKER, AND SHE IS AWESOME. BUT I NEED A MENTAL HEALTH PERSON; I SEE MY PSYCHIATRIST ONLY ONCE EVERY SIX MONTHS. IF YOU ARE IN CRISIS, YOU CAN GET HELP, BUT IT IS SHORT TERM ONLY. I NEED ONGOING HELP. THERE SHOULD BE MORE RESOURCES FOR PEOPLE AT RISK, NOT JUST IF YOU ARE IN CRISIS. -Self-Advocate

About the researchers:

This project was led by researchers at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, McMaster University, the MAP Centre Urban Health Solutions at St. Michael's Hospital, Brock University, and ICES.

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About H-CARDD

Health Care Access Research and Developmental Disabilities (H-CARDD) is a research program that aims to enhance the overall health and well-being of people with developmental disabilities through improved health care policy and services. H-CARDD research is conducted by dedicated teams of scientists, policymakers, health care providers, people with disabilities and families working collaboratively. For more information: www.hcardd.ca.

This study was funded by the Ministry of Children, Community, and Social Services under a Developmental Services Research Grant Fund. The opinions, results and conclusions in this summary are those of the authors. No endorsement by the funders or collaborators is intended or should be inferred.

Do you want to know more?

Provincial study results available here: [“The prevalence and health status of people with developmental disabilities in provincial prisons in Ontario, Canada: A retrospective cohort study”](#), *Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities*. DOI: [10.1111/jar.12757](https://doi.org/10.1111/jar.12757)



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