Youth in Protective Custody:

Examining Integration of Strengths in Psychological Assessment Recommendations

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Abstract

Historically, mental health assessments have emphasized deficits and problems. Recently, the focus has shifted to allow for a strength-based approach. In Mecklenburg County, N.C., when youth are placed in protective custody because of their maltreatment experiences, Teen Health Connection, a comprehensive primary and mental health care organization, conducts Independent Psychological Assessments (IPAs) to identify the youth’s needs and strengths and provide recommendations for services and supports. Although evidence supports the benefits of strength-based approaches, few studies have evaluated the extent to which this approach is used in practice. This study sought to determine the degree to which youths’ strengths were incorporated into IPA recommendations. Qualitative coding was used to analyze 2085 recommendations from 167 IPA reports (completed from 10/14-12/29) for the presence of strengths and positive factors across various domains (e.g., academic, extracurricular). Results indicated that most recommendations (81.06%) did not integrate strengths or positive factors. Domain-specific analysis found higher absolute proportions of strengths and positive factors reflected in extracurricular, mentoring, and family relationship recommendations, and lower proportions among academic, mental health, and living environment recommendations. Findings highlight an opportunity for Teen Health Connection to increase their focus on strengths in their efforts to facilitate positive outcomes for youth.