

POSTER ABSTRACT

The Child and Youth Court Liaison Service

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Young people who are involved in the criminal justice system are a highly vulnerable and disadvantaged group who have complex care needs across a variety of domains (Kosky et al., 1996). Many young offenders have high levels of mental health and substance abuse issues that result from histories of abuse and neglect, family dysfunction, disadvantage and trauma which can increase the risk of future offending behaviour. Inadequate identification, treatment and management of mental health and substance use issues among young offenders may result in both short-term and long-term risks to the health, safety and well-being of the young person, their family members and the community at large.

The Child and Youth Court Liaison Service (CLS) was developed in response to the high rates of mental illness in courts and watch-houses and the need for early identification and diversion of young offenders with mental health issues at the earliest stage of their contact with the criminal justice system. The CLS promotes early identification, assessment, referral and access to support for young people who have mental health needs and are within the justice system. The service also provides assistance, support and advice to a number of court stakeholders and short-term clinical interventions to young people who are placed on supervised orders with the Youth Justice Service.

The Mental Health Act 2016 came into effect in March 2017. The new Mental Health Act gives Magistrates express powers to dismiss a complaint if the court is satisfied that the person charged with an offence appears to have been of unsound mind at the time of an alleged offence or is unfit for trial. This applies to persons with a mental illness, an intellectual disability or another significant mental health condition. When the new Mental Health Act was enacted, the role of the Child and Youth Court Liaison Service was expanded to provide advice and reports to the Magistrates Court to support their decision making powers under the new Act.

Early figures from an evaluation of the Child and Youth CLS has demonstrated that young people encountering the criminal justice system have complex mental health issues, with high levels of comorbidity arising from substance use and intellectual disability, overlaid with other developmental, social and cultural factors. In addition to the normal vulnerabilities and complexities of the general child and youth mental health population, the forensic child and youth population have additional and specific needs, which warrant a "wrap around" approach and is consistent with the CLS model of the service delivery.

The CLS operates within a systemic approach, whereby mental health services are provided to and around young people, enhancing their support and service network. It is argued that in the absence of such integrated and collaborative care models, the child and youth forensic population have an increased risk of incurring significant personal and economic costs in areas such as health, justice and public safety.

Keywords: child; youth; court; forensic; mental
