SOCIAL WORK RESEARCH ON INTERVENTIONS FOR ADOLESCENT SUBSTANCE MISUSE: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

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INTRODUCTION

- Substance use among adolescents remains a significant concern in our society.

- Despite the negative consequences that addictive substances have on adolescents, 75% of all high school students have used addictive substances (including tobacco, alcohol, marijuana and cocaine), and 20% of them meet the medical criteria for addiction (The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University [CASA], 2011; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2012).

- Consequences to young people include injuries, mental health problems (e.g., depression, anxiety), unplanned pregnancies, cognitive impairments, diminished academic performance, criminal and legal problems, and in some cases, even death (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013; CASA, 2011).

- The consequences of adolescent substance misuse place major burdens on society, particularly on the health care, criminal justice, education, and social service systems.

- The purpose of this systematic literature review was to explore the empirical research conducted by social workers on interventions for adolescents with substance use problems.
SOCIAL WORK RELEVANCE

- The NASW states that social work practice is in a unique position to influence the delivery of services to clients with substance use problems (NASW, 2013).

- The organization asserts that social workers have an obligation to apply evidence-informed practices based on emerging research findings and empirical evidence, in order to provide quality services to their clients (NASW, 2013).

- Given the NASW commitment to improve the integrity of the profession through appropriate research and study, it is important for social workers to contribute to the research on culturally sensitive, evidence-based practices (NASW, 2008).
**Cross Cultural Relevance**

- Substance use problems are non-discriminatory and are experienced by people of all ages, ethnicities, cultures, genders, religions, and sexual orientations, across various socioeconomic societies.

- Recent studies have shown that addressing cultural factors can play a significant role in the outcome of adolescent substance misuse treatment.

- In one study, cultural factors including discrimination, acculturation, and cultural mistrust were associated with pre-intervention levels of substance use (Gil, Wagner, & Tubman, 2004).

- Researchers have suggested that further development and assessments of culturally sensitive interventions are needed to address cultural issues and substance use among minority youth (Hodge, Jackson, & Vaughn, 2012).
METHODS

- **Inclusion Criteria:** The articles for the review were selected based on the following: (a) substance use treatment outcome that measure days of use, amount used, and frequency of use will be examined; (b) participants are adolescents, preferably ages 12 to 17; (c) sample size of at least 30 participants; (d) scholarly literature published since 2003; (d) published in a peer-reviewed journal; (e) conducted by at least one investigator affiliated with or has had affiliation with a department or school of social work and has a social work degree (e.g., BSW, MSW, PhD).

- **Data Collection Procedures:** Data collection and study selection in this systematic review began with the following databases systematically searched: Social Work Abstracts, SocINDEX, and PsychInfo. A number of social work and substance misuse journals were individually searched as well. Keyword searches included such descriptors as adolescent, substance use, intervention, and social work. An in depth analysis including screening and filtering articles was then conducted to ensure inclusion criteria were met and full-text articles were examined for relevance and final study selection.
Methods

- **Data Analysis:** In the data analysis, effect sizes, using Cohen’s $d$, were calculated to compare the efficacy of interventions across the studies under review.

- **Quality of Evidence:** Studies were rated using an 18-point scale developed for the review. Criteria on the scoring system include (a) randomization; (b) sample size; (c) diversity of sample; (d) description of sample; (e) study duration; (f) outcome data from more than 70% of original participants at follow-up; (g) follow-up time after intake; (h) outcome measures with demonstrated reliability and validity; (i) self-reported measures checked against objective information source; (j) clear presentation of data; (k) analysis and discussion clearly presented, and (l) study limitations identified and clearly presented.
**RESULTS**

- This systematic review analyzed the content of 17 empirically researched articles written over the last 10 years.
- The methodological quality of the studies was moderate, neither low nor high. Articles that studied only an individual-based intervention yielded a mean rating for evidence quality of 12 (low). Family-based interventions yielded a mean quality rating of 14 (moderate). Multidimensional interventions yielded a mean rating for study quality of 15 (moderate). The remaining study comparing an individual and family-based intervention rated a mean of 16 (high). The mean score across studies was 14 (moderate).
RESULTS

- Individual-based interventions yielded a mean effect size of 0.23. Family-based interventions yielded a small mean effect size as well, of 0.25. However, multidimensional interventions yielded a moderately large average effect size of 0.72.

- Results of this literature review found that multidimensional interventions that include individual, group, family, and community-based treatment components seem to have the largest effect for treating adolescents with substance use compared to other modes of treatment.

- Though some of the individual, family, and community-based interventions reduced substance use and increased abstinence rates among adolescents, most were found to be marginally effective or of uncertain effectiveness for reducing drug and alcohol use.
Overall, though some of the interventions reduced substance use and increased abstinence rates among adolescents, most had relatively small effect sizes. Multidimensional interventions appeared to have the largest effect for treating adolescents with substance use compared to other modes of treatment.

The findings from the present review indicate that social workers’ contribution to this area is improving to some extent. However, with the methodological rigor and research quality of the studies under review at slightly below average, the contribution of social workers to this area still continues to need improvement.

It is important that social workers contribute to this research area and are aware of the effectiveness of various modalities of substance misuse treatment among adolescents. Thus, they will be able to play a greater role in advocating for their clients to receive the most effective interventions.
REFERENCES


