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Stronger societal response needed to assist young people with mental health problems as they move into adulthood

New book calls for changes in a “fragmented and disorganized” treatment system

NOVEMBER xx, 2005 – Making the transition into adulthood can be difficult for all young people. Those with mental health problems often face tougher challenges, but a fragmented support system is failing to meet the needs of these young people as they move into adulthood.

That analysis is included in two chapters of a new, exhaustively researched book produced by [The MacArthur Research Network on Transitions to Adulthood](#), which explores the realities facing young adults as they age out of the programs and services that have supported them as children.

The book, “On Your Own Without a Net: The Transition to Adulthood for Vulnerable Populations,” focuses on young adults with mental health problems, as well as on six other categories of young people, such as those leaving foster care or the juvenile justice system.

The issues involving youth with mental health problems have wide implications. Research shows that nearly one in five people between the ages of 12 and 17, or 4.3 million young people, were treated for mental health problems in 2001. Young people with such problems are at increased risk of dropping out of school, failing to secure work, abusing drugs or engaging in criminal activity.

Two chapters in “Without a Net” focus on this population, concluding that they must navigate a poorly designed treatment system that fails to bridge the transition for many young people as they reach certain age thresholds and enter adulthood. The mental health treatment rate

for young adults between the ages of 18 and 24 is significantly lower than that of younger teenagers.

“Young people with mental health problems who are in transition into adulthood move from one fragmented and disorganized patchwork of agencies and funding streams into another,” conclude authors Phillip M. Lyons Jr. and Gary B. Melton. “Mental health services should be delivered seamlessly, without the need to move from one agency or program to another or to maneuver through a gigantic but tattered web of rules for eligibility.”

These authors call for a renewed focus on the needs of young adults by strengthening communities’ responses to those with mental health problems, so that they can “spontaneously provid[e] support when, where, and how it is needed.” Intensive mental health treatment should be based in the community, whenever possible and those in treatment should receive high-quality care without being socially isolated.

Another conclusion is that in-depth study is required to better assess the needs of this young adult population.

“We know there are large numbers of teenagers and young adults who must cope with mental health problems at the same time they are confronting a range of other issues entering adulthood,” said J. Heidi Gralinski-Bakker, co-author of the accompanying “Without a Net” chapter. “But we need a better understanding of how and why these young people struggle to move into productive adult lives.”

Not only is the mental health system poorly organized toward meeting the needs of youth in transition, these services are typically disconnected from the other sorts of help they require, Dr. Gralinski-Bakker said.

“Young adults struggling with mental illness often not only face all the typical challenges associated with young adulthood, but they also often trail their peers in other realms as well,” Dr. Gralinski-Bakker added. “As a result, such youth may need not only ongoing mental health services, but also educational support or vocational planning, among other services, in order to achieve their potential. The more that can be done to integrate these needed services into seamless, easily-accessible programs, the more we will be doing to help these youth navigate this often-perilous time.”

The chapter titled “Risks Along the Road to Adulthood: Challenges Faced by Youth with Serious Mental Disorders,” was written by J. Heidi Gralinski-Bakker, Stuart Hauser, Rebecca L.

Billings, and Joseph P. Allen. The second chapter, “Coping with Mental Health Problems in Young Adulthood: Diversity of Need and Uniformity of Programs,” was written by Phillip M. Lyons, Jr., and Gary B. Melton.

J. Heidi Gralinski-Bakker is with the Judge Baker Children’s Center and the Department of Psychiatry, Harvard Medical School. Phillip M. Lyons Jr. is executive director of the Texas Regional Community Policing Institute and is on the faculty of the College of Criminal Justice at Sam Houston State University.

“On Your Own Without a Net” is part of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Series on Mental Health and Development, a series of more than 20 policy- and research-oriented books published since 1987.

The book is available at many book stores and can be ordered through the [University of Chicago Press](#), at 1-800-621-8476.

“On Your Own Without a Net: The Transition to Adulthood for Vulnerable Populations,” edited by D. Wayne Osgood, E. Michael Foster, Constance Flanagan and Gretchen R. Ruth. ISBN: 0-226-63783-2.

The Research Network on the Transitions to Adulthood examines the changing nature of early adulthood, and the policies, programs, and institutions that support young people as they move into adulthood. Significant cultural, economic, and demographic changes have occurred in the span of a few generations, and these changes are challenging youths’ psychological and social development. Some are adapting well, but many others are floundering as they prepare to leave home, finish school, find jobs, and start families.

The network is both documenting these cultural and social shifts, and exploring how families, government, and social institutions are shaping the course of young adult’s development. The Network is funded by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation and chaired by University of Pennsylvania sociologist Frank Furstenberg.

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