

Children's Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services Needs Assessment for St. Louis County



A White Paper
based on the findings of the
Children's Services Fund's 2012 Assessment,
conducted by the Applied Research Collaborative.

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Applied Research Collaborative

St. Louis University/Southern Illinois University Edwardsville/University of Missouri-St. Louis

<http://arc.umsl.edu>

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The St. Louis County Children’s Service Fund (CSF) contracted the University of Missouri-St. Louis, on behalf of the Applied Research Collaborative (ARC), to conduct a community-wide needs assessment for children’s mental health and substance abuse services for St. Louis County. ARC applied a multi-method approach to collecting both primary and secondary data to quantify needs and document perceptions of personal and community conditions that affect the mental health of children in St. Louis County.

KEY FINDINGS

Students, parents and school staff in St. Louis County are aware of and receptive to persons with mental illness. While children are aware of how to access mental health services, they lack the tools for communicating to adults about their mental health concerns. Further, parents and school staff are unsure of how to respond to children’s mental health related behaviors, particularly violent behavior.

While mental health services are offered in schools, student access often is limited by requirements for permission to go to a counselor’s office and the counselor not being present when students are seeking service.

While both students and school staff reported that student risk taking behaviors existed in limited numbers, these behaviors are a significant concern for parents/guardians. For those children engaging in substance abuse or those with thoughts of suicide, a large majority of school staff also felt that community resources were inadequate to address student behavioral health issues.

While bullying prevention programs are prevalent in schools, parents report great concern about bullying and students report observing and engaging in bullying.

While agencies funded by CSF provided programs in all 10 statutory mental health and substance abuse service areas and the agencies provided programs in all parts of St. Louis County, the programs were heavily concentrated in two of the 10 service areas (home/community intervention and individual counseling) and there were many neighborhoods in St. Louis County, particularly high poverty neighborhoods that were not served.

The Children’s Service Fund’s annual funding model focuses on the short term and on individual care. Funding longer-term planning and the continuum of care including prevention and early identification are opportunities for CSF.

Opportunities for CSF include clinical referrals, as well as supporting parent training and teacher and support staff in-service training to identify children with social, emotional, or behavioral issues.

SUMMARY OF THE DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The data for this assessment were conducted utilizing a variety of surveys, as well as interviews, focus groups, and examination of annual reports from CSF-funded agencies. The following types of data were collected:

Student Surveys

Public and private school students were surveyed regarding a variety of behaviors, including alcohol, tobacco, and other drug use, depression, suicidal ideation and bullying. A total of 6,091 public and 1,380 private high school students (9th – 12th grades) completed surveys.

Student Focus Groups

Ten focus groups were held with youth who attend educational programs in St. Louis County to determine youth's knowledge of mental health issues and treatment options. Focus groups were conducted at three middle schools, five high schools, and two CYP program sites.

School Staff Survey Findings

1,018 school staff in public and private St. Louis County schools completed on-line surveys in 2012 regarding student behavioral health issues. A large majority of those surveyed were teachers.

Agency Directors' Interview

Interviews were conducted with 19 of 23 possible executive directors of St. Louis County social service agency directors, many of whom receive funding through the Children's Services Fund. The directors were asked questions assessing their perceptions of gaps in mental health services in the County; service utilization barriers; ethnic and racial disparities; their agency's capacity to provide services; use of evidenced-based practice models; and, barriers to implementing new or enhanced approaches to treatment.

Parent/Guardian Surveys

A telephone survey with a sample of 602 St. Louis County parents/guardians of children nineteen or younger was conducted between September 24 and October 1, 2012.

CSF Funded Agency Annual Reports

Analysis of the annual reports submitted by funded agencies shows a pattern of measurement fatigue, with indicators 1 and 2 in each grouping producing a reasonable sample, with the indicators lower on the list receiving much less attention. Measurement fatigue refers to the fact that participating agencies may have been overwhelmed by the number of indicators that CSF presented to them for tracking.

A more detailed executive summary, as well as the full report, may be downloaded from the PPRC homepage. Visit pprc.umsl.edu.