



A Closer Look at Mental Illness and Addictions in People with Developmental Disabilities

What is this research about?

Although mental illnesses and addictions are common among people with developmental disabilities, little is known about people who have this combination of conditions. Health care providers may feel ill-equipped to meet the mental health needs of those with developmental disabilities because of the complex interplay of their disability with their psychiatric presentation. The limited research has focused strictly on mental illness, ignoring addictions because of the misconception that those with developmental disabilities do not access drugs or alcohol.

What did the researchers do?

The Health Care Access Research and Developmental Disabilities (H-CARDD) program examined how many of over 66,000 Ontario adults with developmental disabilities received a mental illness and/or addictions diagnosis in a two-year period using administrative data held at the Institute for Clinical Evaluative Sciences (ICES). They compared the health profiles and health care use of these individuals to other adults with developmental disabilities, and to adults without developmental disabilities. For the group with developmental disabilities and mental illnesses and/or addictions, the researchers looked more closely at those with only mental illness, those with only addictions, and those with both, and compared these three groups across a range of health areas. Health service indicators of interest included the likelihood of using physician, hospital or emergency department services; admission rates and return visits to the hospital within 30 days; and staying in hospital longer than deemed appropriate or than necessary.

What you need to know

Individuals with developmental disabilities who also have a mental illness or addiction are a sizeable and highly vulnerable group. Intensive outpatient supports and better care coordination are needed for this population.

What did the researchers find?

The researchers found that nearly 1 in 2 adults with developmental disabilities have a mental illness or addiction. Among these adults, the prevalence of addiction is twelve percent, which is higher than previously thought. Compared to other adults with developmental disabilities and to adults without developmental disabilities, adults with a mental illness or addiction are more likely to live in poorer neighbourhoods, and have a higher prevalence of serious health issues like diabetes, hypertension and asthma.

Not surprisingly, adults with mental illness or addictions on top of their developmental disabilities are more likely to have contact with physicians in the community and in hospital settings. They are also more likely to have repeat visits to hospital and emergency departments and stay in hospital longer than necessary. The researchers found that the subgroup with both mental illness and addictions are the most vulnerable. They are the most likely to live in poor neighbourhoods and have poor overall health.

About H-CARDD

Health Care Access Research and Developmental Disabilities (H-CARDD) is a research program with the primary goal of enhancing the overall health and well-being of people with developmental disabilities through improved health care policy and services. H-CARDD research is conducted by dedicated teams of scientists, policymakers, and health care providers.

We gratefully acknowledge the Province of Ontario for their support of this project through their research grants program. The opinions, results and conclusions in this summary are those of the authors and do not reflect that of the Province or the data providers. No endorsement by the Province or the Institute for Clinical Evaluative Sciences (ICES) is intended or should be inferred. Parts of this material are based on data and information compiled and provided by the Canadian Institute for Health Information (CIHI). However, the analyses, conclusions, opinions and statements expressed herein are those of the author, and not necessarily those of CIHI.

They have the highest rates of physician visits, but do not see the same primary care provider in a consistent way, and they have the highest use and repeat use of hospital and ED services.

How can you use this research?

We know that adults with developmental disabilities have serious health concerns and complex needs. However, the higher than previously reported addictions rates, poor overall physical and mental health, and patterns in service use suggest that there is a need for more intensive outpatient supports and better care coordination, especially for those who experience both mental illness and addictions. The current study helps inform the need for a major research focus on this vulnerable subgroup to better serve their needs.

About the research team

Dr. Elizabeth Lin, from the Provincial System Support Program at CAMH and **Dr. Robert Balogh**, from the Faculty of Health Sciences at UOIT, both adjunct scientists at ICES, co-led this work with the support of **Avra Selick**, **Kristin Dobranowski**, and **Drew Wilton**.

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Keywords

Developmental disabilities, mental illness and addictions

Do you want to know more/additional resources?

You can find more information about this work at www.hcardd.ca on the mental illness and addictions project [page](#).

View a webinar on addictions [here](#).

Read a [summary](#) of the mental illness and addictions virtual Town Hall

Read a newsletter for caregivers entitled "[Let's Talk about Mental Health](#)" or the "[Dual Diagnosis: An Information Guide](#)"

Access other relevant clinical resources via the Portico website on [Dual Diagnosis](#)

