Citizen’s Awareness of the Causes of Mental Illness

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**Introduction**

Those who are poor, live in violent neighborhoods, and have been involved with the criminal justice system are more likely to face a mental health issue (Lamb & Weinberger, 2011; Markowitz, 2011). Studies reported that people who are raised in low- income neighborhoods where drugs are prevalent and the rate of crime is high tend to have a high rate of chronic stress that can lead to psychotic disorders (Lamb & Weinberger, 2011; Markowitz, 2011). Those who are predisposed genetically to certain mental health complications are at a much higher risk of developing a mental illness if they live in that type of stressful environment. There is little public awareness of the causes of mental illness and how it is formed through environmental stressors, predisposed genetically, or a combination of both factors. (Markowitz, 2011; Peterson, Kennealy, Skeem, & Bray, 2014; Shipley & Tempelmeyer, 2012; Simning, Wijingaarden, & Conwell, 2012 ).

**Causes of Mental Illness, Environment and Genetics**

A mental illness can be a chemical imbalance in the brain, genetics, or psychosocial factors that play a role in the ability to develop a mental illness over time (Markowitz, 2011). The fact that very few mental illnesses are treated or much less even aware of makes it incredibly difficult to cure or tend to. Although many people are predisposed to certain mental illnesses, the surrounding life stressors or trauma can enhance or supplement a mental illness. Every person has different life pressures at different times of their life that can cause depression, anxiety, substance and alcohol abuse, violence, and other reactions (Simning Wijingaarden, & Conwell, 2012; Sullivan, Veysey, Hamilton & Grillo, 2007). It is fairly normal to have cumulative risk factors and stressors that increase and multiply your chances of supplementing a mental disorder. However, certain situations trigger these emotions and reactions and that makes people more vulnerable to develop a mental disability (Markowitz, 2011; Shipley & Tempelmeyer, 2012; Simning Wijingaarden, & Conwell, 2012).

**The Development of Mental Illness Among Youth in Groups, Gangs, and Neighborhoods**

Youth that are raised in poverty, live in violent neighborhoods, have post-traumatic stress, or have absent or abusive parents and guardians are at risk for developing a form of a mental illness (Grillo, Hamilton, Sullivan & Veysey, 2007). African-American youth are at a high risk to develop mental illnesses due to environmental stressors because they often live in high stress neighborhoods (Simning Wijingaarden & Conwell, 2012). It is very likely that children will start to adapt certain habits and lifestyles as their parents, peers, and other surroundings when they reach adolescence (Sullivan, Veysey, Hamilton & Grillo, 2007). The degree of level of mental illness that can form later in life is preventable, however the environment has a huge impact on whether the mental illness will highly influence peer decisions. There are many risk factors that influence youth such as low intelligence, temperament, poverty, poor neighborhoods, delinquent peers, and parental influence of marital status and parental supervision which leads to interaction with the juvenile system (Simning, Wijingaarden, & Conwell, 2012; Sullivan, Veysey, Hamilton & Grillo, 2007). Many more factors should be considered and specific situations to look at, as to how these lifestyles have impacted their mental health and what they might be willing or pushed into doing given their immediate environment.

**Influence of Drugs on Mental Illness and Crime**

Psychiatric illnesses are specifically anxiety, mood, and substance use disorders (Simning, Wijngaarden & Conwell, 2012). Data was collected from an African-American population and their rates of drug and crime rates within their neighborhoods. With both crime rates and drug use as independent variables, they looked at the association and effects between neighborhoods and the prevalence of mental illness. “Perceived neighborhood problems (including crime, drug, and gang activity) have been associated with anxiety and depression symptoms, fear of crime has been correlated with poorer mental health and quality of life, and serious violent crime has been associated with mental illness.” (Conwell, Simning, Wijngaarden, 2012). Most of the findings were due to socioeconomic disadvantages and the correlation with drugs and crime rates.

Many models used for showing signs of mental illness were short-term, twelve-month periods, or in contrary lifetime symptoms. In this case, it could specifically be due to current life events and traumas that can eventually subside (Conwell, Simning, Wijngaarden, 2012). However when life events and stressors are constant they can cause chronic stress and the symptoms do not usually diminish (Peterson, Kennealy, Skeem & Bray, 2014; Simning, Wijingaarden & Conwell, 2012; Sullivan, Veysey, Hamilton & Grillo, 2007). Due to a disorder, one might abuse substances that cause them to act a certain way. In these findings, crime, drugs, and mental illness result from living in poverty and with a low socioeconomic status. Vulnerable populations are at a high risk of developing a mental disorder and will not be able to get the mental health services and treatment they need (Lamb & Weinberger, 2011; Markowitz, 2011; Peterson, Kennealy, Skeem & Bray, 2014; Simning, Wijingaarden & Conwell, 2012; Sullivan, Veysey, Hamilton & Grillo, 2007)

**The Consequences of Incarcerating the Mentally Ill**

There are downfalls of incarcerating and institutionalizing the mentally ill (Lamb & Weinberger, 1998; Markowitz, 2011). However, budget cuts of Medicaid and Medicare have caused psychiatric hospitals to discharge their patients and send them back to the streets of urban areas (Markowitz, 2011). Those in the psychiatric hospital can be a possible threat to social society, although leaving them incarcerated is not necessarily the best possible solution, especially those in jails and prisons without treatment or hospitalization. Some of the cases that require hospitalization are quite severe as they need care and are not able to function in society on their own. Those who are in federal prisons and jails do not receive adequate treatment for their illness, it is even harder for them to function and they are less likely to be released (Lamb & Weinberger, 1998; Markowitz, 2011; Sullivan, Veysey, Hamilton & Grillo, 2007) .

**Limitations of These Studies**

Many of these studies were conducted to incorporate the combination of mental illness and crime within the system. However, we do not know the outliers of those within the criminal justice system who do not have a mental illness or what we would classify as a mental illness. Many people nonetheless have grown up in similar environments as those who have developed mental instability. Drugs and crime in low-income neighborhoods have a high rate of mental illnesses. In this case we have to determine the meaning of mental illness. The people not who do not identify as mentally ill might have just not been tested or included in the data. Either there are outliers that do not fit in the range of data, or these people might actually have some form of mental illness due to environmental stressors, yet they were not included.

**Conclusion**

Mental Illness is very hard to treat and especially hard to identify. It is something that we are not all aware of and not sure how to diagnose. Although there is diagnosis and treatments for schizophrenia, depression, anxiety, and substance abuse, it is not always necessarily a permanent cure. As crime and drugs within poor communities are strongly correlated with mental illness, there is a huge impact on lifestyle surroundings and traumatic events that those predisposed to certain mental illnesses are likely to develop them during these events (Lamb & Weinberger, 2011; Markowitz, 2011; Peterson, Kennealy, Skeem & Bray, 2014; Shipley & Tempelmeyer, 2012; Simning, Wijingaarden & Conwell; Sullivan, Veysey, Hamilton, & Grillo, 2007).

If there was more awareness of the causes of mental illness within the general American population, would society be less likely to victimize and label people as criminals given their history and risk of mental illness? Although a lot of research has been done and knowledge gained on mental illness, there is still a lot more to consider within the meaning of mental illness and how American society deals with it. There might need to be room for a new and innovative approach. However, it is more important to look at the causes and effects, and to learn more about their personal history than the symptoms to know how to properly treat and care for these populations.

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