



Portland, Oregon



Research and Training Center  
on Family Support and  
Children's Mental Health

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# **School and Work: Challenges and Opportunities for Transition-Age Youth with Mental Health Difficulties: Comparing Experiences of European American and African American Youth**

**Presented at:**  
**Building on Family Strengths Conference**

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# Presenters

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## Collaborators:

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# Study Objectives



- This study of the perspectives of European American (EA) and African American (AA) transition-age youth with mental health difficulties was drawn from a larger research project including youth and their family members.
- This poster presentation focuses on:
  - Youth perceptions of the social, psychological, cultural, and economic challenges to community integration (in the domains of school, work and social services), and
  - Opportunities for community integration.

# Research Methods

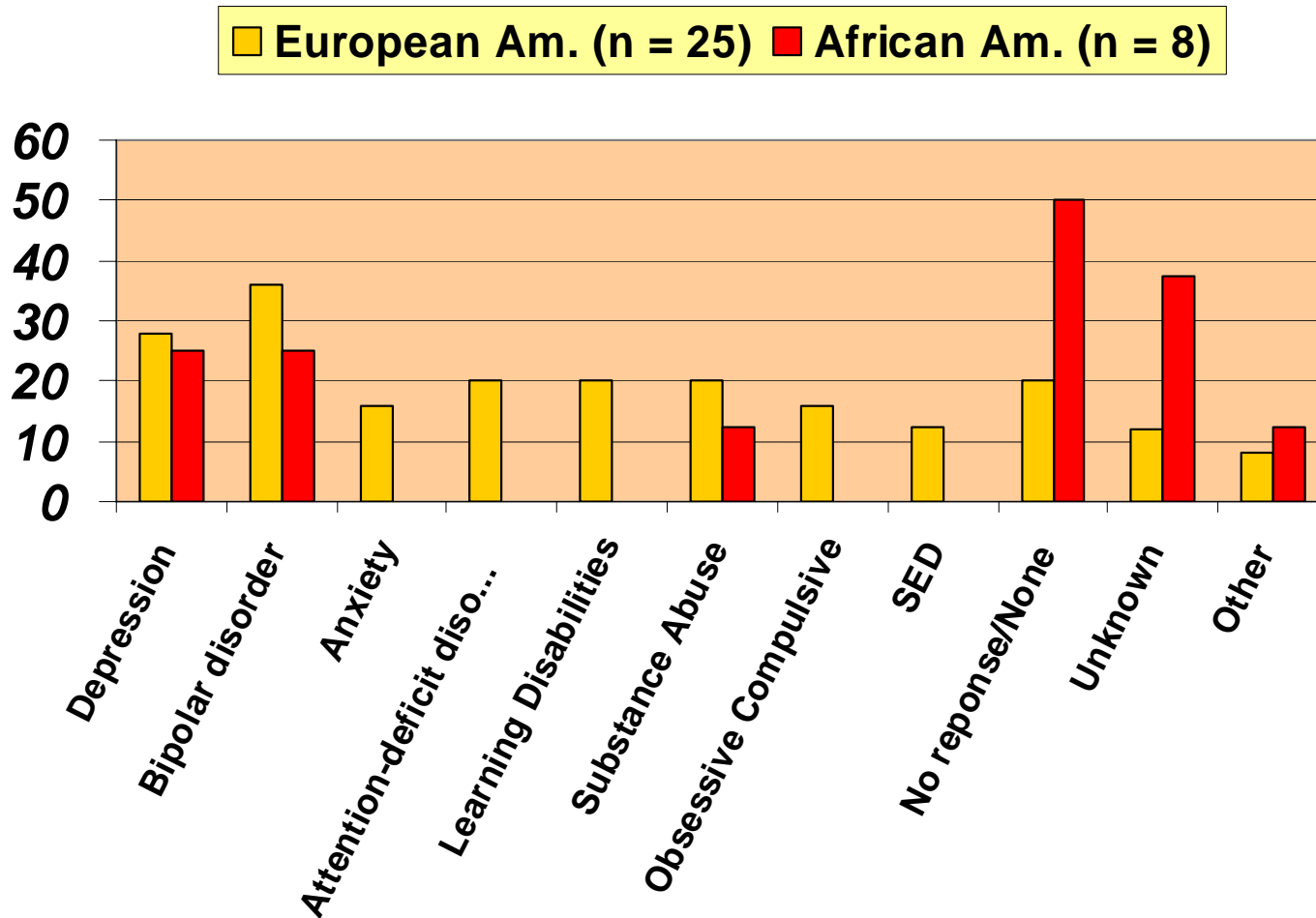


- Consultation with advisory groups of youths aged 17-24 to develop focus group questions and plan recruitment.
- Recruitment of youth to participate in focus groups through contacts with schools, colleges, family support organizations, and mental health agencies.
- Youth research assistants (who had experience with mental health services themselves) took lead roles in moderating groups.
- Participants also completed a pre-focus group demographics and service use questionnaire and received \$30.
- Focus group discussions were audio-taped, transcribed, and entered into *N6* qualitative analysis software.

# Focus Group Participants

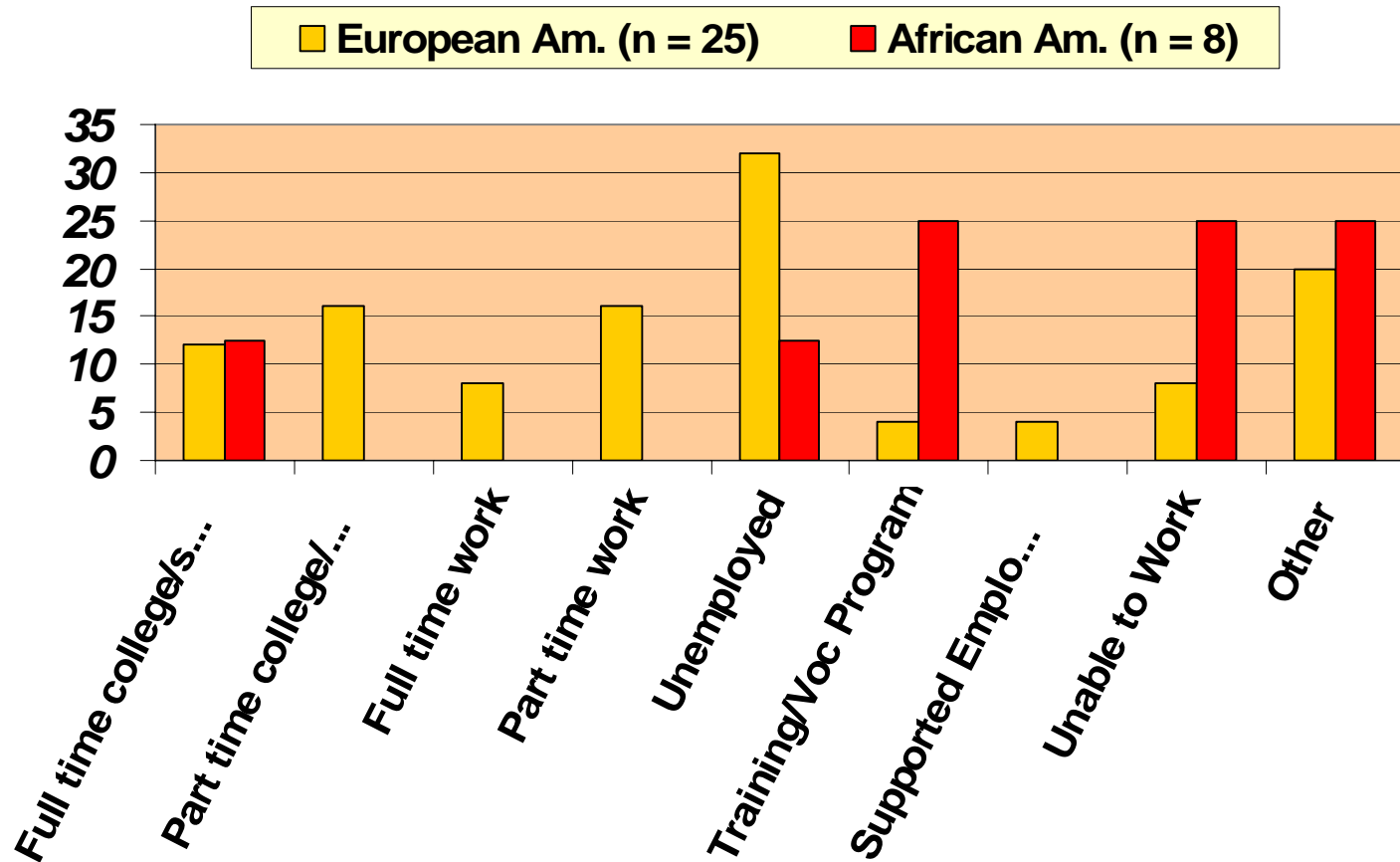
	<b>European-American (n = 25)</b>	<b>African-American (n = 8)</b>
<b>Age</b>	Mean 18.2; range 16-23	Mean 19.4; range 15-23
<b>Gender</b>	72% male	62% male
<b>Level of School</b>	20% in school/GED prgm.; 40% <H.S.; 40% H.S. or GED	0% in school/GED prgm.; 63% <H.S.; 37% H.S. or GED
<b>Living with parents</b>	54%	38%
<b>Living with roommates</b>	13%	0%
<b>Living alone</b>	13%	25%
<b>Living with extended family</b>	17%	25%
<b>Other living situation (e.g., homeless)</b>	13%	13%

# Youth-Reported Mental Health Diagnoses (percentage by group)

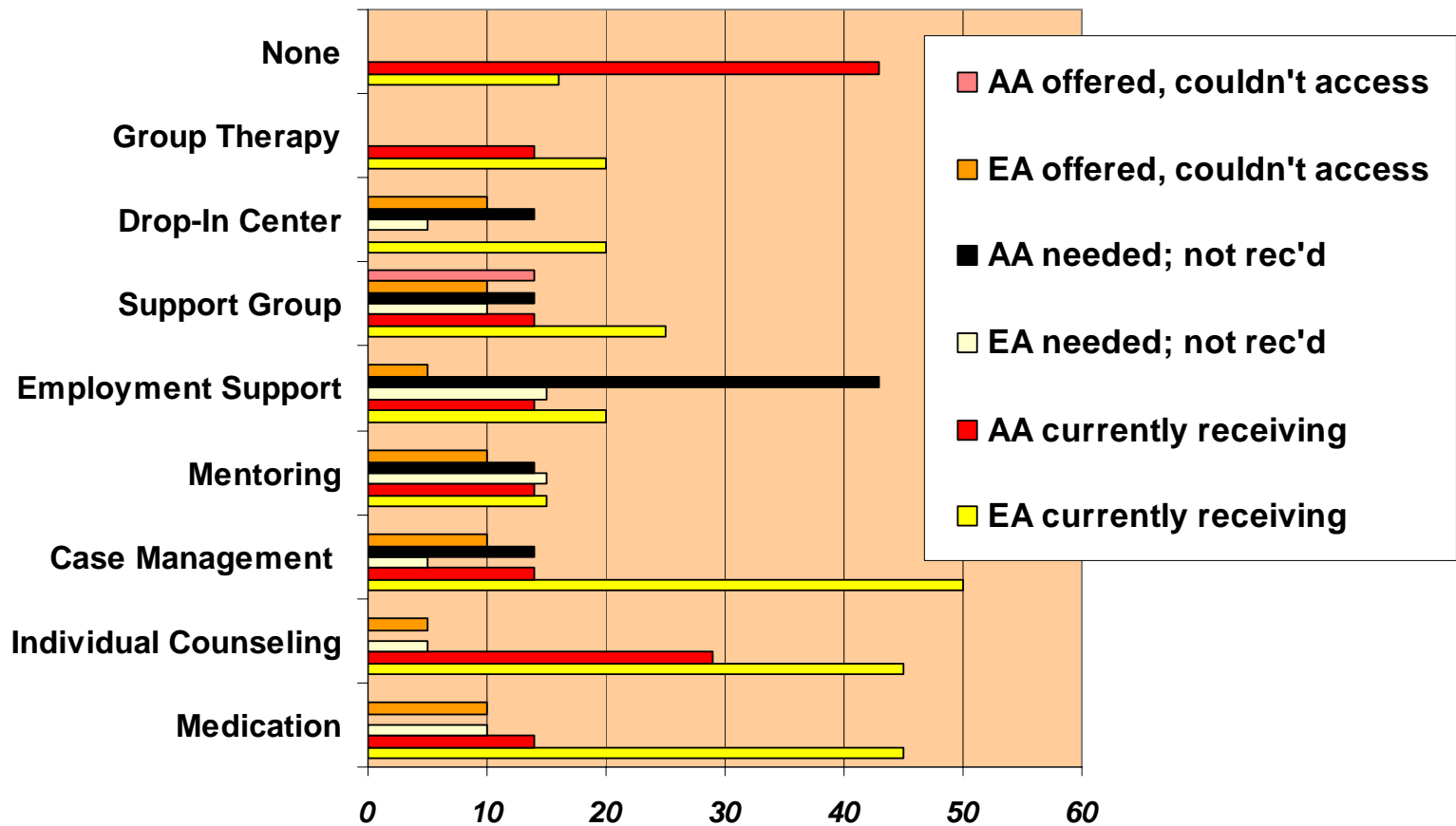


# Youth Involvement in Work and School

(percentage by group)



# Youth Use of, and Access to, Mental Health Services (percentage by condition)



# School: Shared Challenges

## Inflexible school policies

For example, being a few minutes late for class:

- *“...you get detention ...Then I’ll never go to the damned detentions, because it is a waste of time in the first place. If you don’t go they will suspend you. They basically punish you for just for being late, so why would I want to go to school?” -EA youth*

# School: Challenges Unique to EA

## Stigma

- *“I was known as Crazy David... That is what people wanted to call me, so that is what people did call me. I knocked a couple kids out because of that.”*

## Lack of Information

- *“I didn't even realize that the counselors in high school were actual counselors. I thought they were like secretaries who did your schedule.”*

## Lack of Help

- *“Sometimes I just didn't understand and when I raise my hand and said, I don't get it, they just wouldn't take the time that you need, certain people need.”*
- *“There was really no support. If you were a really, really troublemaker kind of kid, then you get more support or access.”*

# School: Challenges Unique to EA

## Discounting/Shaming Staff Behaviors

- *“If you are in a regular school and you didn’t do your assignments they write on the board....’Tim has missed this many assignments’.”*
- *“A couple of them would try and embarrass me in front of the class and I would end up cussing them out.”*

## Ineffective, Non-Individualized Teaching

Participants recognized how schools were unable to meet their unique needs, for example:

- *“I was a really successful student, but I dropped out just because I couldn't handle it. I hated being there. I was like a 4.0 student, so I didn't qualify for the alternative school. I didn't fit in with the other, like smart kids or anything, so I really didn't fit in anywhere.”*

# School: Challenges Unique to AA

## Personal factors

- *"I had a baby, but I was going to school, and I only had two weeks left until I graduated, but I had to drop out."*

## Out of control classrooms

- *"At the high school I went to teachers couldn't control kids in the classroom, all their time was spent on discipline so I didn't learn much."*

# School: Shared Opportunities

## Supportive staff, who make an extra effort

Both groups of youths identified school staff ‘who go the extra mile’ and ‘who do more than what they are paid for’ as important sources of support.

- *“I had a few teachers that I connected with really well, and I would hide out during lunch in teachers’ rooms and stuff. That was the best part of high school.” -EA youth*
- *[Referring to an alternative vocational School program] “They actually help the youth try to get up on their feet and get their School.” -AA youth*

# School: Opportunities Unique to AA

## Provision of concrete resources

A young woman who had become pregnant referred to a specialized program she took part in:

- *“There was a place called the Learning Center, and you got your own caseworker. That way if you have to stop going to school because you need to get a job to get stuff, they help you get it.”*

# Work: Shared Challenges

## Lack of economic resources

- *“Say you are in Section 8 housing then you get looked at differently...I have gone and applied for a job and this dude will get it and he has not other qualities but a little more money.”*
- *“It took me a lot to get a job because I didn’t have transportation to nowhere and I was way far out.”*

## Criminal Background

- *“You can’t get a job because of your criminal background.” -*
- *“Even if they find out you have only one offense you can’t even get a job at Fred Meyer’s [a regional variety store].”*

# Work: Challenges Unique to EA

## **Stigmatizing attitudes toward mental illness, including employer lack of understanding**

- *“I actually had to quit my last job, because it was so bad, because my boss was so unaccommodating. There has to be a medium ground. I would try to explain and she would be like, “Oh, can't help you.”*
- *“...there are times when there is so much pressure that you have to (self-disclose about mental illness) so they understand what is going on. That's when they don't want to hear it or they don't want to understand. They just want to assume you are having a bad day.”*

## **Personal factors-Learning Disabilities**

- *“If you can't read you can't really do most of the work. I can do it physically and mentally but when it comes down to reading things...”*

# Work: Challenges Unique to AA

## Personal factors-pregnancy

- *“Having kids and not having child care.”*

## Lack of School Resources

- *“Not having anything behind you, like a high school diploma.”*



# Work: Shared Opportunities

## Training opportunities

- *“My job, they put us through all these trainings, so that would be good for getting a child development license.”*
- *“They helped me get a job at a pet store. I did that for a couple of years. When I moved here I went and found a job. I work at Safeway.”*

# Work: Opportunities Unique to EA

## Work assistance

- *“They helped me get a job for a couple of months. I worked a couple of jobs. I was a janitor and I worked at a pet store for two years. They find me a job and then I work there. The job that comes, they don't pay me, but the people that got me the job, they pay me.”*

## Understanding supervisors

- *“My direct supervisor, who is a psychologist, knows I have PTSD, but we never bring it up. I just tell him I want to take a few hours off or a day off every once in a while, and he never asks or pressures.”*

# Social Services: Challenges Unique to EA

## Ineffective services

- *“I got my medication from my psychiatrist and I would see her twice a week, but I got absolutely nothing out of that. I've never really felt like they've helped me as much.”*

## Lack of commitment on the part of therapists and counselors

- *“Going to someone who's being paid to talk and listen and after a little while, you're like, ‘Are you really listening because you care like they said or are you sitting there because you want the money?’”*

# Social Services: Challenges Unique to AA

## Services not relevant

- *“Sometimes you just don't connect with some of that stuff. You are just not connected with it.”*

## Services not offered

- *“They never really, you know what I'm saying, worked with me. I never really asked for services.”*

## Violation of confidentiality

- *“All my business was exposed to the person who was taking care of me. It just brought me down to doing worse than what I was doing before I even got into counseling.”*

# Social Services: Shared Opportunities



## Helpful services

- *“He had good advice of how to calm myself down, give me some things called cognitive thinking skills that I started using. Yeah, he just gave me some tools, basically, some tools to use to calm myself down and get my mind straight and things like that.”*
- [Speaking of case manager] *“He helped me get my first job. He made it fun, you know. We would goof around. He was like a buddy. That is what makes it work.”*

## Caring staff who showed an interest

- *“He helped more because he let me make myself better. He didn’t try to force me...He would just hang out more like a friend.”*

# Social Services: Opportunities Unique to AA

## Services offered through alternative programs

- *“There are people that care,” and “Basically you have a whole support system right here. You have somebody to talk to you and you don't want to talk to no outsiders. You talk to people who already know our whole histories. We come right here, and we have us.”*

## Access to concrete services

- *“Use the computer or if I need to use a fax machine, I can come here. Just like that. If I need to fax a job something, I can come here and use it. I have access to that stuff.”*

# Limitations of Our Study



- Geographically limited, non-probability sample.
- We don't know how well our sample represents all European American or African American youths.
- Future studies would benefit from greater ethnic diversity.

# Implications of Our Study

- Although all study participants were referred by mental health providers or had self-identified as having been involved in the mental health system, half of the African American youths did not indicate they had a mental health diagnosis, which influences their ability to access and receive services.
- School is especially important in the lives of youth and youths with mental health difficulties, yet a pervasive lack of understanding of mental health issues persists, and creates Challenges that get in the way of graduating.
- African American youths only identified alternative school programs as places where they experienced supportive staff; European American youths, in contrast, mentioned public schools and colleges in this regard.

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