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An Innovative, Interdisciplinary Intervention for Justice-involved Emerging Adults

Courtney M. Holmes
Virginia Commonwealth University

Jeff Ciak
Virginia Commonwealth University

Marianne Lund
Virginia Commonwealth University

Zehra Sahin Ilkorkor
Virginia Commonwealth University

Grace Kye
Virginia Commonwealth University

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Authors

Courtney M. Holmes, Jeff Ciak, Marianne Lund, Zehra Sahin Ilkorkor, Grace Kye, Miguel King, Karen Akom, Sarah Jane Brubaker, Molly Hyer, and Gary Cuddeback

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Courtney M. Holmes, Jeff Ciak, Marianne Lund, Zehra Sahin Ilkorkor, Grace Kye, Miguel King, Karen Akom, Sarah Jane Brubaker, Molly M. Hyer, Gary S. Cuddeback

Abstract

Interdisciplinary collaboration is an effective training model for counselors-in-training. As it is becoming increasingly likely that counselors will work in multidisciplinary teams postgraduation, engagement in clinical and research intervention teams is essential to promote learning. Benefits for counseling students include the development of self-efficacy, cultural humility, research skills, counseling skills, and interdisciplinary communication and collaboration skills. This article discusses a federally funded, interdisciplinary intervention for justice-involved emerging adults that provides supported employment, trauma-informed mental health counseling, and peer support interventions. The interventions and the structure of the project are outlined, and research and assessment outcomes are discussed. Future directions related to promoting collaborative interventions and addressing the research-to-practice gap in counselor education is discussed.

Significance to the Public

Counselor training programs can significantly enhance workforce development by facilitating experiential learning in multidisciplinary work environments. Counselors-in-training can increase skills and abilities such as social justice advocacy, research skills, counseling proficiency, effective communication strategies, confidence, and professional identity development. This article highlights a federally funded intervention aimed at supporting justice-involved emerging adults through comprehensive and interdisciplinary services, including trauma-informed counseling and peer support, demonstrating the positive impact of collaborative, community-focused initiatives in counselor education and beyond.

Keywords: interdisciplinary, counselor education, justice-involved emerging adults, supported employment, trauma-informed care

Interdisciplinary collaboration is an effective model for counselor training (Okech & Geroski, 2015) and a critical element in effective mental health service delivery across systems (Greidanus et al., 2020; Mellin et al., 2011, O'Leary et al., 2024). Interdisciplinary settings require collaboration and consultation between a wide variety of professionals from multiple disciplines in the process of providing health care services (Nancarrow et al., 2013). Counselors often find career paths that are inherently interdisciplinary such as government agencies, hospitals, state-funded community agencies, and schools. Working in collaborative settings requires counselors to navigate complex professional boundaries, initiatives, and perspectives while upholding professional ethics and alignment with their work scope (Okech & Geroski, 2015). With increased involvement in

Courtney M. Holmes, Grace Kye, Miguel King, College of Health Professions, Department of Rehabilitation Counseling, Virginia Commonwealth University; **Jeff Ciak, Marianne Lund, Gary S. Cuddeback,** School of Social Work, Virginia Commonwealth University; **Zehra Sahin Ilkorkor, Sarah Jane Brubaker,** L Douglas Wilder School of Government and Public Affairs, Virginia Commonwealth University; **Karen Akom,** Rehabilitation Research and Training Center, Virginia Commonwealth University; **Molly M. Hyer,** Institute for Women's Health, Virginia Commonwealth University. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Courtney Holmes, Department of Rehabilitation Counseling, Virginia Commonwealth University, 900 E. Leigh St.., Richmond, VA 23298 (email: cmholmes@vcu.edu).

interdisciplinary public health initiatives, supporting counseling students' development during their graduate studies is important as the United States needs a well-trained, diverse behavioral workforce, particularly in rural and underresourced areas, to address disparities in service access, use, and outcomes. As such, counselors are called to develop and maintain ethical practices founded on inclusion, multicultural competency, and social advocacy (ACA, n.d.; Council for Accreditation for Counseling and Related Educational Programs [CACREP] Standards, 2023). One area ripe for multidisciplinary intervention is justice involved spaces focused on successful reentry and reducing recidivism.

Justice-Involved Emerging Adults

Within the justice system, the term *justice-involved youth* refers to all those who have entered the justice system between the ages of 14–17, and who are serving sentences carried over until the age of 24, creating a population aged 14–24. Within this population, the term *emerging adults* refers to justice-involved individuals who are 18–24 years old. A point-in-time analysis shows approximately 96,000 individuals ages 18–24 were incarcerated in 2020, along with approximately 30,000 individuals below the age of 18 (Annie E. Casey Foundation [AECF], 2021; Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, n.d.). Among justice-involved emerging adults, incarceration rates and related mental health sequelae are a pervasive mental health concern, with disproportionate impacts being shouldered by emerging adults of color (Abrams et al., 2021). Critical racial disparities exist among placement rates: Black individuals are placed in juvenile facilities at 5–10 times the rate of white individuals, Tribal individuals are placed at 4 times the rate of their white counterpart, and Latino/a individuals are placed at 16 times the rate of their white cohort (AECF, 2021; Rovner, 2024). In addition to racial/ethnic minorities, individuals with disabilities, especially emotional and behavioral disabilities, are overrepresented in the juvenile justice system (Kubek et al., 2020). The prevalence of girls in the juvenile justice system has also increased and their unique treatment and service needs often go unmet (Parrish, 2020).

Social determinants of health have a critical impact on the juvenile justice system; emerging adults (ages 18–24) involved in the justice system are likely to have faced social and economic challenges, including family economic instability, poverty, and unemployment. Justice-involved emerging adults, in contrast to their non-justice-involved peers, attend public schools that experience higher rates of underfunding, housing instability, inadequate health care, barriers to nutritious food access, and a lack of consistent transportation (Voisin et al., 2017). Post-traumatic stress disorder, childhood maltreatment, and childhood adversity are 80% higher in justice-involved juvenile populations than in the general population, and adverse childhood experiences are related to elevated criminogenic risks (Baglivio et al., 2020; Branson et al., 2017; Duron et al., 2022; Graf et al., 2021; Vitopoulos et al., 2019; Voisin et al., 2017). Emerging adults, especially those with behavioral health disorders, are at higher risk of poor outcomes among their peers, including homelessness, unemployment, low education levels, post-traumatic stress disorder, stigma, low social support, and severe disparities in social determinants of health. Furthermore, girls are likely to experience multiple forms of trauma, or "polyvictimization" (Kerig, 2018; Lopez & Nuño, 2016; Modrowski et al., 2021). In addition to external and prior experiences, 93% of system-involved youth experience traumatic events within residential facilities (Kraut, 2024).

Many of the traumatic, social, and economic challenges facing emerging adults contribute to mental health and substance use struggles (Duron et al., 2022). Emerging adults in facilities are estimated to have a rate of mental health disorders that is three times higher than that of the general emerging adult population, with some estimates of 65–70% meeting criteria for a mental health diagnosis (Kraut, 2024). More than 60% of those with mental health disorders also have substance abuse issues, suggesting co-occurring and integrated

treatment is necessary to support positive reentry (Elkington et al., 2020; Kraut, 2024).

While interventions that address employment, trauma, and social support do exist, they are often not combined into one service or intervention, which ultimately has a negative impact on access and continuity of services. Given the systemic, interconnected, and contextual nature of recidivism, a collaborative and multifaceted intervention approach is required. Furthermore, interventions must be focused on workforce development and the inclusion of counseling students to train providers to work effectively with justice-involved emerging adults.

This article discusses a federally funded, community-engaged intervention designed to promote interdisciplinary training in both clinical services and research for mental health and rehabilitation counseling, social work, public policy, and criminal justice students. The intervention we developed — called Project Belong: Building Education and empLoyment Opportunities through trauma-informed reeNtry planninG — is funded by the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA). Research foci include Project Belong's impact on employment, education, criminal justice, behavioral health, and other outcomes to assess efficacy and utility of intervention design. Justification for and description of an intervention focused on promoting mental health, job placement, and career development of justice-involved emerging adults is described, along with the organization and structure of the interdisciplinary training model. Assessment, outcomes, and future directions are discussed.

Multidisciplinary Interventions

This intervention integrates multiple interventions into a holistic, transdisciplinary strategy aimed at reducing recidivism during the reentry process. Each study participant works collaboratively with intervention staff to develop an individualized treatment plan. Based on this plan, study participants determine whether to participate in all components of the program or select specific interventions tailored to their needs. Intervention support is provided for each participant for up to 12 months following release. Detailed descriptions of each intervention component are provided next.

Employment Interventions

Stable employment plays a critical role in reducing recidivism and criminogenic risk (Cuddeback et al., 2024; Kolbeck et al., 2023). Supported employment, an evidence-based intervention, helps individuals with disabilities, including mental health and substance use disorders, secure and maintain competitive employment (Cuddeback et al., 2024; Wehman et al., 2018). The most widely used supported employment model for individuals with serious mental illness (SMI) and behavioral health challenges is individual placement and support-supported employment (IPS-SE). This recovery-oriented approach emphasizes personal strengths and goals, promotes multidisciplinary collaboration, and supports individuals in achieving and maintaining meaningful competitive employment (Bond et al., 2015). While IPS-SE is effective in improving employment outcomes, its impact on criminogenic risk depends on job quality and personal commitment. Employment reduces criminal behavior only when individuals find their work meaningful and are strongly committed to their roles (Apel & Horney, 2017). To enhance the effectiveness of supported employment programs, it is essential to prioritize jobs that foster engagement and long-term stability, moving beyond low-wage, temporary positions that may fail to reduce criminogenic risks (Frederick & VanderWeele, 2019; Kolbeck et al., 2023). By promoting meaningful employment, IPS-SE programs can strengthen social bonds, restructure daily routines, and improve economic security, thereby addressing key factors that influence desistance from criminal behavior.

This intervention study follows the supported employment process, including identifying study participants' strengths and needs, job development, application support, securing employment, and ensuring workplace accommodations (Wehman et al., 2018). It integrates IPS-SE components such as concurrent mental health services and

individualized long-term support to optimize outcomes (Bond et al., 2023). Students in the rehabilitation counseling training program at the researchers' institution can participate in practicum and internship experiences with the supported employment team, gaining direct experience providing supported employment services to justice-involved emerging adults.

Mental Health Interventions

Mental health interventions are a critical and necessary component to effective reentry and recidivism reducing programs. Trauma-informed care is critical given the high levels of traumatic experiences endured by people who are justice-involved. Trauma alters behavioral, social, emotional, and physical development and elevates risk for victimization, criminality, substance abuse, poor academic performance, depression, anxiety, and chronic disease (Felitti et al., 1998; Olson et al., 2022). All services delivered by the program are trauma-informed, and all interventionists are trained in providing such services.

The BJA grant funds a licensed mental health clinician to provide ongoing trauma-informed care mental health counseling services to study participants. Evidence-based strategies such as emotional freedom techniques (EFT), motivational interviewing (MI), trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy, and mental health skill building are used. EFT is an evidence-based intervention combining exposure, cognitive therapy, and somatic stimulation shown to decrease symptoms of depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Bach et al., 2019; Church et al., 2018). MI is goal-directed, client-centered counseling designed to resolve goal ambivalence (Clair-Michaud et al., 2017). Engagement with participants through trauma-informed care and motivational interviewing is aimed at reducing the severity and frequency of trauma and mental health symptoms and it is designed to allow participants to more fully engage in prosocial behaviors such as building positive social supports, maintaining housing and employment, decreasing substance use, and decreasing risky behaviors.

Students in clinical training (e.g., mental health counseling and social work) at the researchers' institution can complete their practicum and internship experiences under the supervision of a licensed professional. Students deliver individual and group mental health interventions both within the facility prior to participants' release and in the community after release, under the oversight of the grant-funded community mental health provider. Treatment consists of trauma-informed interventions such as emotional freedom techniques, trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy, dialectical behavioral therapy, and motivational interviewing. Students have a wide range of experiences within the justice system, promoting a depth of understanding regarding social and structural barriers to reentry. Clinical training includes weekly individual and group supervision provided by intervention staff (e.g., faculty members with clinical experience/relevant training and licensed interventionists).

Prosocial Support Interventions

Providing mentoring and prosocial support during incarceration and after release significantly reduces recidivism (Lesnick et al., 2023; Weinrath et al., 2016). Credible messengers, such as community mentors and care workers, play a crucial role in supporting juveniles by fostering prosocial behavior and building strong support systems (Weinrath et al., 2016). Forensic peers, leveraging their own experiences with the criminal justice system and desistance, serve as trusted allies who help study participants address challenges related to housing, employment, and health care, ultimately reducing recidivism (Barrenger et al., 2019; Lenkens et al., 2023). Using a credible messenger approach, we connect study participants with trusted individuals who share similar life experiences, such as justice system involvement or community ties (Lesnick et al., 2023). Our peer recovery specialist offers low-demand, flexible contact (e.g., phone, email, or in-person meetings), to provide prosocial support and connect study participants with community resources. This includes addressing behavioral health concerns, strengthening social networks that

promote desistance (e.g., family, housing, and employment), and enhancing problem-solving and stress management skills.

Interdisciplinary Training Program Organization and Structure

While our main goal is to study the impact of the intervention on employment, recidivism rates, and behavioral health symptoms, we have also established a multidisciplinary training program at our university with students and faculty from social work, public policy, criminal justice, and mental health and rehabilitation counseling. The project brings together three university schools/colleges, a university research institute, a research and training center, and community partners/justice facilities highlighting a multidisciplinary training model. The team includes faculty from the Institute for Women's Health at Virginia Commonwealth University and the Research, Rehabilitation, and Training Center (RRTC). Community and justice facilities include multiple juvenile detention facilities (e.g., state and city), a county jail, and city school programs that interface with the justice system (see Figure 1 for personnel organization).

Figure 1

Personnel Organization

The project has a dedicated research initiative to study the effectiveness of the intervention. A project coordinator (e.g., a university instructor) is responsible for fostering communication and scheduling between the intervention team and the community and justice facilities, as well as providing individual support to study participants regarding appointment reminders, facilitating access to transportation, and ensuring communication between study interventionists and participants. The program coordinator has two decades of experience working in justice reform and restorative justice community spaces and initiatives.

All interventions are provided in addition to the services justice facilities offer as standard of care. Community providers have been hired through project funds (e.g., LCSW, peer recovery specialist, supported employment provider) and these providers serve as the interventionists with student support. Master's and doctoral students from social work, mental health and rehabilitation counseling, public policy, and criminal justice participate in both intervention delivery and research tasks.

Besides functional areas of expertise and educational backgrounds, the university faculty and student demographic makeup also represents a diverse group of collaborators. The university team consists of 17 members (11 faculty and 6 students). The demographic makeup is represented by the following: 75% percent are female, approximately 30% percent are racial/ethnic minorities, 20% percent speak English as a second language, 20% have international citizenship, 20% identify as having a disability, and 25% identify as having financially disenfranchised backgrounds. The team also has a high level of age diversity, as age ranges of the team include the following: 20–30 (12%), 31–40 (25%), 41–50 (30%), 51–60 (25%), and 8% were undisclosed. Team diversity is fundamental in bringing various perspectives and approaches to the discussions, offers an opportunity to learn from each other in a multicultural setting, and makes it easier to sustain engagement with study participants and community partners. We continue to intentionally diversify personnel with backgrounds and experiences that represent the demographic makeup of the emerging adults this project serves. The collaborative environment of ongoing participation provides the opportunity to see a federally funded intervention from multiple viewpoints, assisting in knowledge development of practices from different professional perspectives, ultimately improving the service delivery quality.

Interdisciplinary Training for Counselors-in-Training

A collaborative and multidisciplinary treatment approach for reentry is critical for reducing recidivism (Dempsey et al., 2021; Rojas & Peters, 2016), and counselor education students can participate in cross-disciplinary efforts to bolster their clinical training experiences (Ohrt, et al., 2019). The project is designed to promote overall professional development of students in multiple ways. The World Health Organization (WHO) highlights the global gap in mental health service accessibility, partly due to the lack of integrated, community-based, multidisciplinary models (WHO, 2010). The project is particularly focused on workforce development, as in the United States in 2022, nearly 47% of the population lived in mental health care shortage areas (American Counseling Association [ACA], n.d.; Virginia Health Care Foundation [VHCF], 2022). Providers specializing in trauma and criminogenic risk factors are especially scarce. Participation in training programs that include community-based research projects can increase self-efficacy, cultural competence and humility, and networking skills (Keim et al., 2015; Kilgo, 2015; Midgett & Doumas, 2016), all of which are important for effective mental health providers.

First, a fundamental component of interdisciplinary education is the ability to discern one's professional identity from others and better understand the role of other professionals (Mellin et al., 2011). Interdisciplinary training should, "teach students to navigate the complex dynamics of collaboration while maintaining a clear understanding of their own professional identity" (Okech & Geroski, 2015, p. 10) and promote self-efficacy and confidence (Ohrt et al., 2019). For

example, the project includes several professional intervention strategies, including mental health counseling, supported employment, and peer recovery support. Students in public policy have subject area knowledge about and interest in criminal justice policy, programming, and practice. They also are trained to identify opportunities for policy development and implementation and to analyze the policy implications of outcomes of interventions, such as those implemented through this project. All professionals benefit from training regarding how their professional skill sets are both unique and can be utilized collaboratively in conjunction with other services.

Second, skills for collaboration are important to cultivate, including attitudes, knowledge, and skill development (Okech & Geroski, 2015). Attitudes toward collaboration need to be instilled through practice and supervision across a counselor's training program. Counselors should develop a respect for other disciplines, as well as an openness to share and collaborate (Nancarrow et al., 2013; Okech & Geroski, 2015). It is critical that counselors do not assimilate hierarchical professional perspectives or promote siloed approaches to clinical practice. Knowledge of collaborative practice includes awareness of group dynamics as well as self-awareness regarding how personal beliefs and values can impact group work (Nancarrow et al., 2013; Okech, & Geroski, 2015). Third, collaboration skills include flexibility, empathy, active listening, openness to new ideas, confidence, power sharing, and effective communication strategies (Nancarrow et al., 2013; Okech & Geroski, 2015).

This project fosters an interdisciplinary training model where students receive feedback, suggestions, and professional guidance from transdisciplinary faculty (e.g., social work, public policy, and counselor education) at weekly team meetings. Clinical supervision focused on the development of intervention skills as well as self-reflection and insight development of the student practitioner is provided by the grant-funded community providers (e.g., licensed mental health clinician and supported employment specialist) as well as a licensed faculty member.

Research Interventions

As research is a critical function of counselor education, the scientist-practitioner model embraced by counseling and other social science promotes effective evidence-based practice (Fickling, 2023; Lambie & Vaccaro, 2011; Lee et al., 2014). As such, students from counseling, social work, and public policy programs participate as research assistants, gaining critical skills in promoting high-quality community-based research. Students participate through established 1-credit research electives offered by the faculty researchers. Participation in the electives includes weekly research meetings with the project team, research training, and supervised experience with participant recruitment, data collection, and analysis procedures.

To evaluate the efficacy of the intervention, a research team involves students from all departments in subject enrollment, data collection, analysis, and writing. Under the guidance of the project coordinator and staff, students manage data collection timelines and complete CITI research training for IRB approval as research assistants. They receive training in research protocols, consenting, and data collection procedures from faculty. This hands-on experience in community-engaged research enhances learning outcomes for counseling students, equipping them with skills to measure program effectiveness and promote best practices (Barrio Minton et al., 2021).

Assessment and Outcomes

Intervention assessment is focused on multiple target points: (a) emerging adult recidivism, employment, and mental health outcomes; and (b) learning outcomes for students. To examine Project Belong's impact on employment, education, recidivism, behavioral health, and other outcomes, data collection occurs at baseline, 6 months, and 12 months, and includes standardized measures of functioning (e.g., mental health, substance use,

trauma, social support), as well as assessments of social determinants of health, criminogenic risks, housing, recidivism risk, and service utilization.

Learning outcomes for students include: (a) professional identity development, (b) collaboration and communication skills, (c) ethical decision making, (d) social justice and advocacy identities, (e) trauma informed care skills, and (f) research skills. Some outcomes are investigated using quantitative measures, such as a trauma-informed knowledge and attitude assessment (King et al., 2019), and a social justice advocacy measure (Chen-Hayes, 2008). Quantitative outcomes are measured at the beginning of students' participation and at the end of each subsequent semester they participate. Other skills may be assessed through clinical supervision evaluation and qualitative interviews at the completion of their work on the project.

Students actively contribute to setup, planning, curriculum development, and weekly cross-disciplinary discussions. Anonymous feedback was collected and highlights the value students find in the inclusive, collaborative environment and the professional growth they experienced in areas like teamwork, project management, grant writing, IRB processes, and understanding research implementation. Four out of five student respondents reported growth in professional identity, collaboration, and social justice advocacy skills. Formal data collection for the project's research outcomes is ongoing.

Implications for Practice

Project innovation includes a focus on building and enhancing resilience to promote successful reentry, rather than solely targeting risk reduction. Through the integration of mental health services into supported employment interventions, we recognize the connection between psychological well-being and other outcomes such as employment and recidivism. Furthermore, inclusion of peer support recognizes that successful reentry needs to include engagement within the community. Using a credible messenger approach, we connect study participants with trusted individuals who share similar life experiences (Lesnick et al., 2023), ultimately promoting community engagement and connection. This model seeks to break down traditional barriers between services, ensuring justice-involved emerging adults receive comprehensive and collaborative support.

The implications for counseling practice include emphasizing trauma-informed care, interdisciplinary training, and manualizing holistic intervention approaches for justice-involved emerging adults. Trauma is extremely prevalent in justice-involved populations (Baglivio et al., 2020; Branson et al., 2017; Duron et al., 2022; Graf et al., 2021; Vitopoulos et al., 2019; Voisin et al., 2017). To engage effectively in the field, counselors-in-training should be well-versed in all aspects of trauma care, including the etiology of trauma, family systems issues, brain development, and evidenced-based trauma informed interventions such as EFT and MI (Bach et al., 2019; Church et al., 2018; Clair-Michaud et al., 2017). A critical part of this work includes understanding the intersections between mental health, substance use, trauma, and justice involvement, highlighting the need for training in co-occurring diagnosis and trauma-informed treatment models. Counselors-in-training would benefit from increased access to transdisciplinary training models and treatment teams to ensure they learn from and contribute to systems-focused collaborative processes working with justice-involved populations. Finally, this project seeks to formalize intervention manuals of the interdisciplinary intervention to continue implementation and research efforts.

Future Directions for Research

Future research directions should focus on strengthening interdisciplinary collaboration and improving intervention efficacy. One area for future research is to investigate the long-term impact of multidisciplinary, integrated interventions, such as Project Belong's impact on recidivism, employment stability, and mental health outcomes. Findings in the literature consistently point to trauma, mental health disorders, and lack of stable employment as

primary drivers of recidivism among justice-involved emerging adults (Abrams et al., 2021; Cuddeback et al., 2024; Voisin et al., 2017). While research supports the use of supported employment interventions to reduce recidivism, more can be understood about how mental health interventions and peer support mediate such outcomes.

Scaling the intervention to other geographical locations and larger systems would be useful in determining generalizability of results. Such research would support implementation and adoption of similar models, ultimately impacting policy changes, to reduce barriers to the integration of collaborative, community-involved interventions. Finally, future research can examine how graduate training programs prepare students for ethical, effective community-based work and identify best practices for integrating mental health counseling, social work, and criminal justice education in clinical and community settings (Barrio Minton et al., 2021; Hays et al., 2019).

Conclusion

Community-engaged, interdisciplinary research is critical for the promotion of health equity, reduction of health disparities, and the development of an informed and effective workforce. The intervention outlined here is a federally funded initiative focused on reducing juvenile and emerging adult recidivism through a multidisciplinary, collaborative intervention, including supported employment, trauma-informed mental health counseling, and peer support and credible messengers. Through transdisciplinary collaboration, students in mental health and rehabilitation counseling, social work, public policy, and criminal justice engage in experiential learning through the application of research and clinical skills under supervision. Critical professional skills such as communication, collaboration, social justice advocacy, trauma informed care, ethical decision making, and a scientist-practitioner orientation are developed. This model can serve as a guide for alternative and additional cross-discipline collaborations in other university and justice settings.

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Author Information

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Courtney M. Holmes, PhD, LPC, LMFT, NCC, CRC, is an Associate Professor at Virginia Commonwealth University in the College of Health Professions and a certified clinical trauma professional. Her research interests include promoting trauma informed care across interdisciplinary contexts and increasing mental health access for families.

Jeff Ciak, MSW, is a social work doctoral student at Virginia Commonwealth University. His research interests include serious mental illness, lived experience in research, and health disparities.

Marianne Lund, MSW, MEd, is a social work doctoral student at Virginia Commonwealth University. Her research examines entrepreneurship, education, and mental health among Latinx immigrants and refugees.

Zehra Sahin Ilkorkor, MIA, is a public policy doctoral student at Virginia Commonwealth University in the Wilder School of Government and Public Affairs. Her research revolves around economic development and social mobility with a focus on the impact of public policies on vulnerable groups' access to economic opportunities.

Grace Kye, BA (psychology), is a master's student at Virginia Commonwealth University in the mental health and rehabilitation counseling program with a concentration in clinical mental health counseling. Her research interests include promoting child and adolescent mental health and wellness.

Miguel King, BA (psychology), is a master's student at Virginia Commonwealth University in the mental health and rehabilitation counseling program with a concentration in clinical mental health counseling. His research interests are in children and adolescents within the juvenile justice system, the foster system, and how trauma affects the brain/body.

Karen Akom, EdD, is an assistant professor at Virginia Commonwealth University in the Rehabilitation Research and Training Center where she serves as the director of field operations. Her research interests include postsecondary transition for students with disabilities, interagency collaboration, and youth with disabilities involved in the justice system.

Sarah Jane Brubaker, PhD, is a sociologist and a professor of criminal justice and public policy at Virginia Commonwealth University. Her research interests include gender violence and gender in the juvenile justice system through intersectional and social justice lenses.

Molly M. Hyer, PhD, serves as the director of research development and innovation for the Virginia Commonwealth University Institute for Women's Health. The main arc of her research career has focused on sex disparities, particularly the mechanisms by which developmental stressors act as risk factors for disease states in adulthood (e.g., psychiatric disease, drug abuse, and dementia).

Gary S. Cuddeback, PhD, is a professor and dean at the School of Social Work at Virginia Commonwealth University. Dr. Cuddeback's research is focused on improving the lives of individuals with mental illnesses, especially those who are involved with the justice system.

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