

An unmet need: FASD in youth entangled in the justice system

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Background:

Young people in the justice system are disproportionately affected by neurodevelopmental disabilities, particularly Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD). Individuals with FASD are 19 times more likely to be incarcerated, yet the condition remains under-recognised in Australian justice settings. A landmark WA study found 36% of youth detainees met diagnostic criteria for FASD. Without early diagnosis and support, these young people face increased risk of recidivism, secondary disabilities, and unjust legal outcomes. Assessment is often hindered by fragmented histories, frequent placement changes, and the time-intensive nature of evaluations.

Methods:

In 2023, a partnership between the NSW Youth Justice system and the NSW FASD Service launched a fast-track model to accelerate FASD assessments for court-involved youth. The model includes a diagnostic case conference and multidisciplinary assessment aligned with Australian FASD guidelines. A retrospective review of cases referred through the fast-track model to date was conducted, examining demographics, prenatal alcohol exposure, and neurodevelopmental impairments. This included referrals from specialist courts such as the Koori Court.

Results:

Eighteen referrals were received with 9 assessments completed, 1 in progress, and 5 waitlisted. All assessed individuals met FASD diagnostic criteria. Youth diagnosed with FASD were all male, median age 16 years (range 12–17), predominantly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (78%), and mostly in out-of-home care (89%). Severe impairments were most common in attention (100%), adaptive behaviour (67%), language (55%), cognition (55%), and affect regulation (44%). Co-morbidities included ADHD (100%), disruptive/impulse control/conduct disorders (88%), and mild intellectual disability (44%).

Conclusion:

This study highlights the need for routine neurodevelopmental assessment in justice-involved youth, particularly young males of Aboriginal background. The fast-track model demonstrates feasibility and impact, enabling timely diagnosis and access to supports, and promoting health-informed justice responses.

Disclosure of Interest Statement:

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