



## YOUTH REENTRY

### Introduction

Each year approximately 100,000 youth under 18 are discharged from secure placement.<sup>1</sup> Most youth, however, are not provided with the critical assistance necessary for successful transition back to their communities, schools, homes, and peer groups. Youth often return to neighborhoods with few supportive programs, high crime rates, poverty, and poorly performing schools.

Public safety is compromised when youth exiting secure detention are not afforded the necessary supportive services back in their communities. Supportive services that youth need include life skills training, employment assistance, counseling, school reintegration assistance, adequate healthcare, and secure and safe housing.

Detained young people are incarcerated at a key developmental phase of their adolescence. Upon leaving an out-of-home placement without the necessary skills to cope with adult responsibilities, many youth find themselves unemployed and homeless. Without these necessary skills, these youth are at an increased risk of reoffending and contribute to recidivism rates as high as 70% in some areas.<sup>2</sup> Research consistently suggests recidivism frequently occurs within a few days of release, when reentry services should be underway but are often lacking.<sup>3</sup>

### Characteristics of Reentry Youth

The reentering population is overwhelmingly male (86%), 60% African American, and 88% are 15 years old or older.<sup>4</sup> Nearly two-thirds of youth who end up in secure confinement have been convicted of nonviolent offenses.<sup>5</sup> The typical sentence for youth who are sentenced to detention is 4-6 months.

### Youth Needs for Successful Reentry

#### Education

Educational services provided in juvenile detention facilities are often substandard and in cases where youth are transferred to adult prisons, they may receive no education whatsoever.<sup>6</sup> In fact, more than *half* of youth in secure placements have not completed the eighth grade and *two-thirds* of those leaving formal custody never return to school.<sup>7</sup> Upon exit, these youth are at a disadvantage as they attempt to reenter school and find themselves far behind their peers.

Virginia's Board of Education has adopted a set of guidelines to support youth upon reentry from secure placement, based on extensive experience, research, and input from advocates, parents, schools, detention centers, and formerly incarcerated youth.<sup>8</sup> The guidelines comprise four parts: clearly identified roles and responsibilities of various agencies to develop a seamless transition for youth; involvement of youth and families/legal guardians in the process of reenrollment; immediate reenrollment upon exit from detention; and suitable placement post-release so that youth are attending classes that are appropriate for their education level. Individualized plans are recommended to ensure that each youth is provided with targeted services.

Despite the strong connection between school truancy, dropouts, and delinquency, reenrollment in school for youth exiting detention is frequently a low priority for the juvenile justice system. To counter this, Maine now has a state law in place that requires advance planning for reentry, cross-agency collaboration among service providers, family engagement, and a deadline-driven transfer of materials for all incarcerated youth transitioning back to school. Once a youth is set to be released, a “reintegration team” is assembled to coordinate successful reentry from the detention facility where the youth resides, the school administrator, the youth’s teachers, the youth’s family, and the school guidance counselor.<sup>9</sup> Youth need to be taught the importance of transitioning back to school immediately upon release from secure placement; however it also must be acknowledged that youth require assistance in making this transition. Specialists who work with youth and relevant agencies can assist with this before release.

In 2006, practitioners working on Pennsylvania’s Models for Change Initiative identified several barriers to school reentry for youth who had been in the system. In response, they led a statewide commitment to improving the transition back to school through trainings and the development of a comprehensive guidebook for practitioners that provides useful information from pre-placement through release and reintegration to the community.<sup>10</sup> The state also employs three aftercare specialists to assist juvenile justice professionals working with youth upon release.

### Employment

Research consistently shows that individuals who have a job are less likely to engage in crime, yet when formerly incarcerated individuals seek employment, they may encounter obstacles, especially if their record has not been expunged. In one 2009 study of young people, high school dropouts were half as likely to be employed as those with a college degree, and those who dropped out of high school were 63 times more likely to be in an institution (jail, prison, or juvenile detention) than those who had completed college.<sup>11</sup> Nearly 10% of young high school dropouts were in a correctional institution. Since employment is directly related to involvement in crime, youth should be trained to develop employable skills to secure a job upon being released from secure placement.

Youth in secure custody in Houston are enrolled in one-stop centers, which assist them in obtaining employment upon release through advice, counseling, and access to a statewide database, which connects youth to employment opportunities.<sup>12</sup>

### Health Care

Many eligible youth have mental health, medical, and/or substance abuse needs upon reentry. Many states terminate Medicaid benefits of youth enrolled in Medicaid programs prior to detention despite no requirement from federal law to do so. This removes youth access to direly needed medications and services upon exit from secure confinement. Upon release, reapplying for Medicaid benefits may take up to 90 days, delaying vital treatment and jeopardizing successful reintegration.<sup>13</sup> Among 46 states and the District of Columbia, only 13 state Medicaid agencies and 6 juvenile justice agencies reenroll eligible youth for Medicaid upon release from detention.<sup>14</sup> California and New York forbid youth termination of Medicaid enrollment.

## **Components of Effective Reentry Programs and Services**

Successful principles for ensuring transition back to the community have been identified by the juvenile justice field and include the following:<sup>15</sup>

- Pre-release planning services;
- Located in the community where returning youth live;
- Individualized service to assist with developmental deficits;
- Concentrate heavily on ensuring school reenrollment, attendance, and success;

- Focus on permanent family/guardianship connections;
- Include access to mental health and substance abuse treatment;
- Offer support and preparation for obtaining employment
- Provide guidance and support for obtaining residential stability

In Missouri, praised by many as the gold standard for juvenile justice services, the reentry process begins upon admission to the facility. The program includes the features mentioned above along with educational, vocational, counseling, and employment assistance. Upon exit, youth stay in frequent contact with mentors and service providers for approximately six months. According to the 2010 Missouri Department of Social Services, Division of Youth Services Annual Report, the recidivism rate for Missouri juvenile offenders released in 2008 was 8.2%.<sup>16, 17</sup>

## Conclusion

Providing access to reentry services and aftercare programs for youth reentering society can help to reduce recidivism and foster successful reconnections with families and communities.<sup>18</sup> Comprehensive wrap-around services provide exiting youth the direction they need to make better choices for their future, and keep our communities safe.

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<sup>1</sup> Synder, H. (2004). An empirical portrait of the youth reentry population. *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice* 2, 1, 39-55.

<sup>2</sup> Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2009). *KidsCount essay: A map for juvenile justice reform*. Baltimore, MD: Annie E. Casey Foundation.

<sup>3</sup> Youth Reentry Task Force of the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Coalition. (2009). *Reinstatement of Medicaid Benefits For Youth Exiting Detention: A Fact Sheet*.

<sup>4</sup> Nellis, A., & Wayman, R. (2009). *Back on track: supporting youth reentry from out-of-home placement to the community*. Washington, DC: The Sentencing Project.

<sup>5</sup> Sickmund, M., Sladky, T.J., & Kang, W. (2009). *Census of juveniles in residential placement databook*. Washington, D.C.: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

<sup>6</sup> Rivkin, D. H. (2008). Legal advocacy and education reform: Litigating school exclusion. *Tennessee Law Review* 75: 265-285.

<sup>7</sup> Roy-Stevens, C. (2004). *Overcoming barriers to school reentry*. Washington, D.C.: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

<sup>8</sup> JustChildren/Legal Aid Justice Center (2004). *A summary of best practices in school reentry for incarcerated youth returning home*. Charlottesville: JustChildren/Legal Aid Justice Center; Virginia Administrative Code, 8 VAC 20-660-10 *et seq.*

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Lowan, J.& Mamas, S. A. (2009). *Educational aftercare and reintegration toolkit for juvenile justice professionals*. Philadelphia: Education Law Center-PA/Models for Change.

<sup>11</sup> Sum, A., Khatiwada, I., McLaughlin, J., & Palma, S. (2009). *The consequences of dropping out of high school: Joblessness and jailing for high school dropouts and the high cost for taxpayers*. Boston: Center for Labor Market Studies, Northeastern University.

<sup>12</sup> Harris, L. (2006). *Making the juvenile justice-workforce system connection for re-entering young offenders*. Washington, D.C.: Center for Law and Social Policy.

<sup>13</sup> Youth Reentry Taskforce, *supra* note 3.

<sup>14</sup> Nellis, *supra* note 4.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Recidivism was measured as youth returning to the Department of Youth Services since being released in 2008.

<sup>17</sup> Missouri Department of Social Services. (2010). *Division of youth services annual report fiscal year 2010*. (2010).

Missouri Department of Social Services. Jefferson City, MO: Missouri Department of Social Services.

<sup>18</sup> Act 4 Juvenile Justice. *Fact sheet: Youth reentry plans and services needed to aid successful reintegration to the community*. Washington, DC: Act4JJ.