

# EXPLORING REENTRY: Creating a Continuum of Care to Support Ohio's Youth

In the United States, each year an estimated 100,000 youth are released back from juvenile correctional facilities into their communities. These young people return with complex issues. Often, they are unable to access needed medical care, behavioral health, or other treatment services. They also struggle to obtain a job or enroll in school. Problems are likely to be further compounded when these children return, unprepared, to surroundings that may have contributed to their delinquency. These issues can contribute to youth homelessness or multiple system involvement.

Unfortunately, not a lot is known about effective juvenile reentry practices and research on the topic is limited. Understandably, much of the current reform work is focused on efforts to prevent youth from entering the system in the first place. However, it is also imperative to assist delinquent youth who are removed from their homes with transitioning back to families and communities. Developing comprehensive reentry services fosters successful reintegration, reduces recidivism, increases public safety, and ultimately saves taxpayers money. This fact sheet highlights current issues around juvenile reentry.

## What is Reentry?

Reentry refers to the process and experience of returning to society after a term of incarceration. For our purposes, it is the transition of youth from secure juvenile correctional settings back to schools, families, and communities. Reentry can also be referred to as “transition,” “reintegration” or “aftercare.”

Reentry is more than a process; it is a philosophy. At its foundation, reentry involves the belief that all youth have strengths that must be cultivated for their successful return home. The notion of preparing institutionalized youth for their reintegration is not a new concept. However, the current framework recognizes most youth do not require secure confinement, and for those that do, the act of locking them up is insufficient to prevent future delinquent behavior. Rehabilitation for youth sent to correctional facilities, or any out-of-home placement, involves a spectrum of services and supports that starts at inception of confinement and continues throughout the youth's reentry back into the community. Youth face significant barriers in reestablishing themselves and should not be expected to do it alone. A comprehensive reentry program acknowledges and accounts for these factors.

## What is Unique about Juvenile Reentry?

Reentering youth are simultaneously experiencing two types of transitions, one from confinement back to the community and the other from adolescence to adulthood. Although the legal age of majority in most states is 18, a child does not automatically become an “adult” in thinking and behavior at that point. The brain is not fully developed during adolescence, leaving youth particularly vulnerable to spontaneous and less-reasoned decision-making, as well as the powerful impact of peer pressure. Hence, the attainment of important life skills happens gradually as a young person moves from reliance on his family to self-determination.

In one study, youth identified three fundamental skills that helped them succeed in adulthood: taking responsibility for oneself, making independent decisions, and becoming financially independent. In a highly controlled, punitive setting, it is often not feasible to undertake or obtain these skills. This creates a significant challenge for youth as they often return from confinement with low self-esteem, poor track records, little to no money or savings, few marketable skills, and no legitimate history

in the workforce to help their employment prospects. This same study revealed that while youth expressed excitement about a chance at independence, they realized the frightening truth: that they were unprepared to do so.

Youth leaving secure confinement face many of the same difficulties as reentering adults, yet they also are in the midst of moving from dependence on family and systems to independence, from school to work, and from immersion in the adolescent peer group to intimate partnerships and other adult relationships. Research has documented the various pathways that youth follow into juvenile delinquency and the intersection of those pathways with the development of the adolescent brain. Finding prospects for successful reentry are closely tied to accomplishments along these developmental paths.

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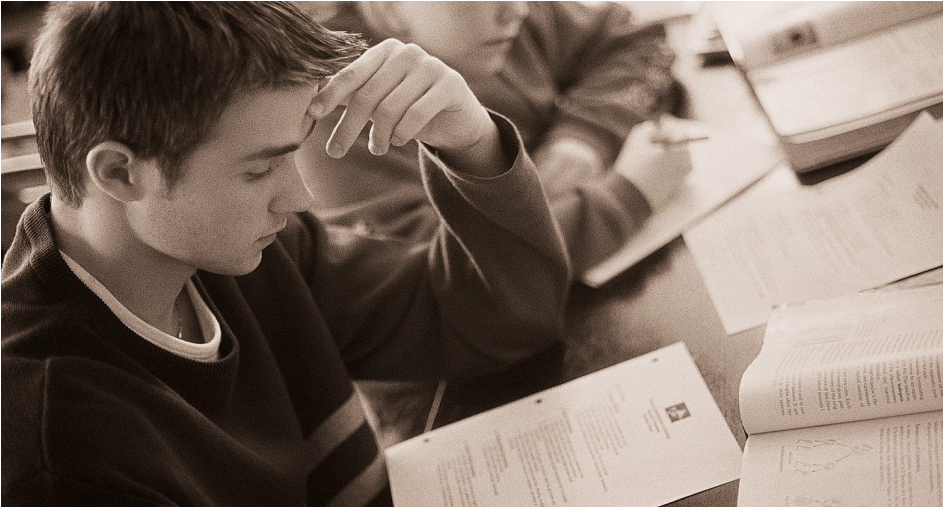
— Mercer Sullivan, Youth Perspectives on the Experience of Reentry

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## Characteristics of Reentering Youth

Youth in the juvenile justice system are some of the most vulnerable children in the United States. National studies reveal that most youth in secure confinement are male, from communities of color and are nonviolent offenders. Additionally, the statistics show that among the youth in secure confinement: the majority have not completed 8th grade (as compared to one fourth of similarly aged youth in the general population); two thirds report regular use of drugs, excluding alcohol; two-thirds have a mental health disorder (with a higher rate for females); and 75-93% of youth have been victims of trauma (as compared to 34% of all children in the U.S.).

Sadly, those locked in Ohio's juvenile facilities fall in line with these statistics. The Ohio Department of Youth Services (ODYS) reported that in May 2011, 54% of the 758 committed youth were placed on the mental



health caseload, with 90% of all confined girls on that caseload. A 2009 report from the Ohio Ex-Offender Reentry Coalition indicated that 76% of youth ordered to ODYS institutions had known mental health issues prior to commitment. The 2010 Annual Fiscal Report from ODYS revealed that 66.1% of committed youth were youth of color, 93.9% were male, 32.7% were admitted for property offenses and 80% were assessed to have substance abuse issues. The report also showed that a high percentage of incarcerated youth struggle in school and have educational and behavioral disabilities. For example, although 79% of committed youth were age 16 or older, the average math and reading level of all committed youth was 6th grade. Further, 54% of committed youth were identified as in need of special education.

## Why is Reentry Important?

Reentry is a vital justice issue. Greater attention has been placed on reentry as legislators, juvenile justice and correctional professionals, and community leaders have acknowledged that public safety is compromised and taxpayer costs soar when youth are released from secure confinement ill-prepared and ill-equipped to succeed in their communities.

The Federal Advisory Committee on Juvenile Justice has also called for more awareness and consideration of juvenile reentry. It issued recommendations that ask the President and Congress to prioritize reentry in all areas of juvenile justice programming by increasing funding, offering more technical assistance and training on the topic, and by requiring states to develop effective community-based reentry services that use a system-of-care model.

While research is scarce, it has been shown that youth who are released from institutional confinement are more likely to succeed if they

have access to services that can help them thrive in a non-institutional environment. In 2010, the annual cost to incarcerate a juvenile in Ohio was approximately \$123,370 per year. That figure does not account for other administrative related costs or the costs to the victims of crime. If the reentry process is successful there are benefits for the community in terms of improved public safety and in the reduction of the overall cost of juvenile corrections.

## Complexities in Juvenile Reentry

The high cost of confining youth in Ohio should result in a meaningful return on this investment, such as youth not returning to the juvenile justice system. However, the data shows this is not the case. In 2006, the State of Ohio estimated that within a three year period of release almost 50% of transitioning youth would reenter the juvenile or adult criminal system. Another examination of the ODYS population found that approximately 51% of youth released remained unemployed throughout the duration of parole supervision. Additional studies (not Ohio-specific) revealed:

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*Successful reentry is important not only to the futures of children and their families, but also to the well-being and quality of life of families and neighborhoods throughout Ohio and to economic recovery.*

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— 2009 Annual Report, Ohio Ex-Offender Reentry Coalition

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- 50% of adolescents who age out of the child welfare and juvenile justice systems will be homeless within six months because they are unprepared to live independently, have limited education and no social supports.
- After one year of being released, 70% of reentering youth are out-of-school and unemployed.
- 46% of all homeless youth between the ages of 10 and 17 had been in a correctional facility, and of those, 44% left the correctional facility and went to live in an unstable housing situation.
- Up to 70% of youth will reoffend, often within a few days of their release, when reentry services should be underway, but are absent.

There are many factors that contribute to these statistics.

**Lack of Stable Housing.** Many studies of homeless youth demonstrate the connection between youth homelessness and contacts with the juvenile and criminal justice systems. One of the most important factors to ensure successful reentry into a community is stable housing. For youth who are released from juvenile corrections facilities, reentry is often difficult because they lack the familial support systems and opportunities for work and housing. Without stable housing, youth can experience homelessness, causing them to become involved in survival activities that could lead to additional juvenile justice system involvement.

**Educational Barriers.** Delinquency and persistence in offending have long been associated with poor academic performance. Incarcerated youth perform at academically low levels and have high rates of failure and grade retention. Numerous youth enter facilities with educational disabilities and are already behind in credits and grade levels. Educational services provided in juvenile correctional facilities are often substandard and do not align with the curriculum in the youth's home school. Upon exit, these youth are at a further disadvantage as they attempt to reenter school and find themselves far behind their peers or are unable to transfer back to school systems. There are a myriad of barriers to a youth's smooth educational transition. For example, substantial delays are caused by lost paperwork,

schools fail to recognize a youth's educational progress for the time spent in the juvenile institution, or current accountability policies may allow schools to exclude students who display academic or behavioral problems.

#### **Lack of Access to Health Care and Treatment.**

The prevalence of health problems is much higher for incarcerated youth than for the general population, which makes health care an especially important aspect of the reentry process. Incarcerated youth have higher than average rates of substance abuse, sexually transmitted diseases, unplanned pregnancies, and psychiatric disorders, all of which can impact behavior and the ability to make healthy decisions. However, many youth have no access to health care when they return home. For example, many states terminate rather than suspend Medicaid benefits to eligible youth while they are confined, or those who have a criminal record may be denied access to public health care benefits.

**Adolescence.** As previously mentioned, system involved youth are confined at a key developmental phase. Not having the opportunity to build coping and decision making skills around adult responsibilities contributes to their chance of reoffending. Accordingly, reentry strategies are more likely to succeed if they assist adolescents in achieving developmental milestones and improve their sense of self within their world.

#### **Separation from Family and Supports.**

Research shows that incarcerated young people who maintain positive relationships with their loved ones are more likely to succeed. Unfortunately, a significant number of youth are placed at great distances from their families. Others may enter secure confinement without strong connections to their families or are unable to maintain family ties while they are confined. To promote these connections, juvenile justice professionals must consider "family" broadly and seek ways for youth to remain in contact with their support systems. It is also imperative to have these support systems involved and engaged in the youth's care and rehabilitation throughout his commitment and reentry phases.



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

Although juvenile reentry programs began to receive attention in the early 1990s, it is still considered an emerging field. Currently there are two primary reintegration models. Both involve the coordination of case management and rehabilitative services at the inception of the youth's confinement, continuing throughout his release and into his reintegration back into the community. The National Reentry Resource Center's Advisory Committee on Juvenile Justice is developing resources to increase the likelihood of successful juvenile reentry and promote safer communities. The Committee's work is currently focused on five key areas:

1. Integrating the science of adolescent brain development into the design of reentry initiatives;
2. Ensuring that reentry initiatives build on youths' strengths and assets;
3. Engaging families and community members in a meaningful manner throughout the reentry process;
4. Prioritizing education and employment as essential elements of a reentry plan; and
5. Providing a stable, well-supported transition to adulthood that helps to create lifelong connections.

It is considered best practice to plan for reentry when a child is first removed from his/her home and that it be done in collaboration with the youth, his/her family, community-based services providers, the court, and institutional/residential placement staff. Reentry should also include:

- The development of an individualized reentry plan based on a comprehensive assessment of risks, needs, and strengths of

the youth, his family and community;

- A network of community services that are accessible upon release; and
- A transition phase where institutional controls and supervision reduce over time as the youth's interaction with the community increases.

One state that has had some success with reentry is Missouri. There the reentry process begins upon admission to the facility and when exiting, youth stay in frequent contact with mentors and service providers for approximately six months. In 2007, the Missouri recidivism rate (measured as youth returning to the facility who had been incarcerated during the previous two years) was only 7%.

Clearly, effective reentry is a spectrum of processes and services that happens in phases and encompasses all areas that are significant for a youth's well-being. It is also imperative that there be adequate numbers of well-trained caseworkers (e.g., parole officers) to keep down caseloads, and that there be a plethora of quality community-based programs and supports.

## **Reentry in Ohio**

Ohio has also acknowledged the significance of reentry as well as existing shortcomings in its own juvenile reentry system. These deficiencies include: a high percentage of youth with mental health and substance abuse issues combined with a lack of commensurate adequate mental health services for youth; lack of adequate educational/vocational training; and a lack of viable employment opportunities and/or services and supports linking youth to employment. However, stemming from both litigation and the desire to better serve kids, Ohio has started to build a foundation for reentry.

For example, a few years ago the Ohio Ex-Offender Reentry Coalition was created to foster discussion and policy at the state level. There is an agreement between ODYS and the Ohio

Department of Job & Family Services to suspend, rather than terminate, Medicaid benefits of eligible ODYS committed youth, allowing benefits to be restored quickly upon release back to the community. Ohio also has started a few juvenile reentry courts. In 2011, Ohio enacted amendments to the Ohio Revised Code that give juvenile courts continuing jurisdiction over youth committed to ODYS for the entire length of the youth's stay. The latter affords local courts more opportunities to monitor the rehabilitative and reentry efforts of youth, so that youth are released when they are ready and to ensure that support plans are in place.

Within the state juvenile correctional system, ODYS is working with the Vera Institute of Justice and the University of Cincinnati to develop a tool that helps identify young people's social supports, train parole officers on effective practice in community supervision, and incorporate a cognitive behavioral approach into interactions. The release process has also been revamped to mandate individualized case planning. ODYS reduced its number of parole officers due to the closure of three of its facilities. In May 2011, there was a daily average of 924 youth on parole with only 59 parole officers serving the entire state.

Although these steps are movement in the right direction, concerns remain about reentry. In 2010, more than 500 Ohio juvenile justice stakeholders participated in a process designed to gather information about how to better assist youth and enhance public safety. Stakeholders relayed stories of youth who were rendered homeless or denied access to public schools when returning to their communities. Others talked about youth who reached the age of majority while in the system and therefore had

no ability to access needed services through the juvenile system after they were released. Representatives from rural counties indicated they had few to no formal programs for reentry and use foster care when housing is needed for youth returning to the community. Overall, they described an inconsistent, problematic approach to reentry, with much of it dependent upon the available county resources and the individual parole officer.

The information gathering process also included formerly committed youth who conveyed that more programming options in ODYS facilities are needed as being idle can undermine progress. Thus, when they have completed their treatment goals, programming should continue that focuses on reentry skills if their period of incarceration is not over. Youth shared preferences for programs that teach them skills, particularly vocational skills, that they will be able to use once released. They also appreciated opportunities to advance their education (taking college level classes), helping in the community (volunteering), participating in peer-to-peer support, and gaining insight into their behavior. Parents of these youth expressed the need for more creative services focused on education and rehabilitation and the ability to communicate with someone on staff at ODYS to help monitor their child's progress.

## Policy Considerations

Ohio has already taken the important step of acknowledging that its reentry system for juveniles must be improved and while many reforms are underway, there is still more than can be done for youth that are securely confined but will return to our communities.

A few actions that can help support state and local jurisdictions in their reentry efforts are:

1. Ask the United States Congress to reauthorize the Juvenile Justice Delinquency and Protection Act with provisions that specifically identify and fund reentry as a critical phase of the juvenile justice system.
2. Require data collection on reentering youth in order to better understand the needs of Ohio youth and support the development of successful, evidence-based reentry services.
3. Create a wide array of housing options for transitioning youth to reduce homelessness and multiple system involvement.
4. Identify and remove system barriers that prevent or delay youth from returning to schools once back in his/her community.
5. Enhance the range and accessibility of education and vocational program opportunities for youth within their period of confinement and increase the number of youth that are obtaining their high school diploma or equivalent.
6. Identify and eliminate the barriers for youth to access community-based mental health and behavioral health services when they return to their communities.
7. Integrate the science of adolescent brain development in the design of reentry initiatives so that reentry planning, case management, and supervision strategies are grounded in cognitive approaches suited for youth.
8. Expand workforce and other educational opportunities in ODYS by using technology and examining other creative options.
9. Maintain the practice of suspending (rather than terminating) Medicaid benefits of eligible youth while they are in ODYS custody and look for other state agency partnerships that will improve benefits to eligible youth.
10. Ask that juvenile courts, with their new continuing jurisdiction over committed youth, become more involved in reentry efforts and hold hearings that involve family, community programs, and legally represented youth in advance of a youth's release to confirm that a feasible, individualized and meaningful reentry plan is in place.
11. Assess how local jurisdictions and parole officers can be more effective in creating a continuum of care for youth.
12. Use juvenile justice funding for behavioral health/juvenile justice and reentry programming in order to support screening, assessment, and evidence-based services.
13. Continue to use state incentives and evidence-based practice to increase reentry services while decreasing the number of youth initially committed to ODYS.



## Conclusion

Young people reentering after periods of confinement can have difficulty transitioning back into the community and becoming successful, contributing members of society. When released, many youth will have never graduated from high school, held a job, or lived independently and some are returning to communities where poverty, homelessness, drug addiction, and crime are endemic. The magnitude of the youth reentry problem, and the challenges associated with it, raises profound policy issues.

Ohio is poised to make significant advances with juvenile reentry programming building upon opportunities offered through statutory and institutional reforms. For reentry programming to be effective, it must include a continuum of care that spans a wide array of critical needs including mental health, education, substance abuse, employment/vocational training, and family engagement and strengthening. Research-based interventions, adequate staffing of well-trained juvenile correctional and parole officers, and availability of community programming are vital to promoting youth well-being, productivity, and reducing recidivism. To move forward, the state needs to remain highly focused on reentry and adequate funding of reentry efforts must be a priority.

## Resources

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