

# Aftercare Services Are Key to Positive Community Adjustment.

## SUMMARY

For juvenile offenders who have been in residential placement, the aftercare period—the six months or so right after return to the community—is a critical time. While in placement, many adolescents receive services that address problematic issues and promote skills. But for these services to be effective, they must be linked to services in the community that build on them to promote positive development and successful re-entry.

These lessons have emerged from recent studies:

- Institutional placement is a repeated and disruptive event for serious adolescent offenders.
- Aftercare supervision and services are key to promoting positive community adjustment.
- Major factors in a successful transition are school, work, and community-based mental health and substance use services, along with court supervision of sufficient intensity and duration.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

Juvenile justice systems should ensure that:

- Re-entry planning begins as soon as a youth enters placement.
- The planning links the youth's institutional and community experience.
- Planning addresses the multiple, critical factors in a successful transition.

## The juvenile justice system relies heavily on institutional care for serious adolescent offenders.

While the number of adolescents in juvenile justice institutions has decreased considerably over the last decade, the system still uses institutional placement regularly. On any given day, there are almost 70,000 adolescents in institutional placement in the United States.<sup>1</sup> Most often, these are youth who have committed serious offenses, such as aggravated assault and other offenses against another person.<sup>2</sup>

Institutional placement is not simply punishment. A fundamental principle of the juvenile justice system is that adolescents are amenable to change, and many people believe that time in an institution can help redirect a youth's behavior in a more positive direction. While providing services should never be a reason to put a youth in placement, some see it as an opportunity to address issues that promote offending, such as substance use, or to provide educational support or build vocational skills. In this view, institutional placement can increase an adolescent's human or social capital, paving the way to successful development.

But in reality, this vision is rarely achieved. For too many young people, institutional placement is instead a developmentally disruptive event. Even when the youth receives appropriate services in placement, the impact of those services depends

on how the skills learned or resources provided get put into action when he or she returns to the community. If institutional care is to remain part of the juvenile justice system, planners and administrators must build on its potential to promote positive development and thus reduce antisocial behavior. This requires focused plans for re-entry: ones that use the aftercare period (the initial six months after placement) to build a strong bridge to services and support in the community. Services and supports that begin in placement and flow into the community can bolster the youth's chances for success.

### Institutional placement is a repeated and disruptive event for serious adolescent offenders.

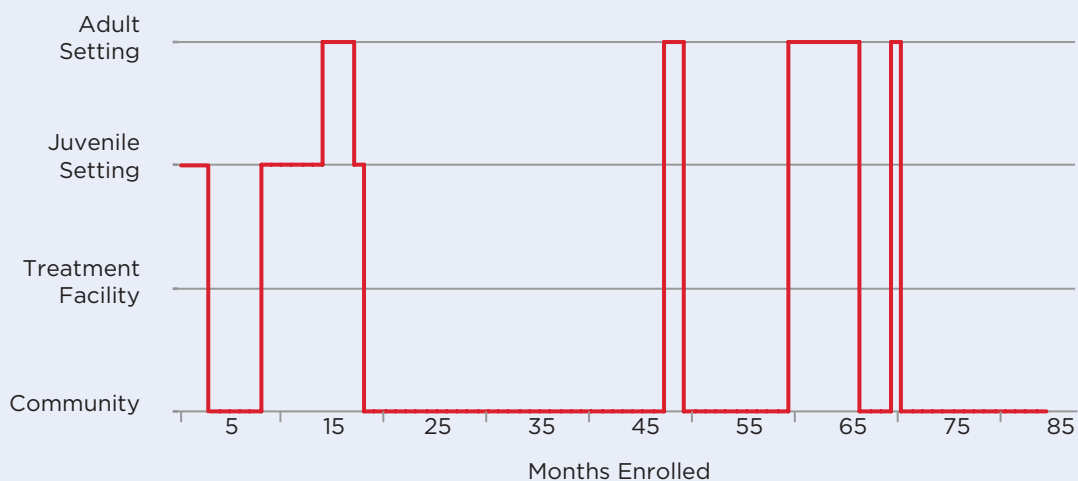
Recidivism rates for juveniles placed in institutions range from 50 to 90 percent,<sup>3</sup> and serious juvenile offenders typically have more than one period of time in placement. Among participants in the Pathways to Desistance study,

87 percent were in institutional placement at some time during the seven-year observation period, about 50 percent before age 18. The average number of juvenile placements was about three; the average number of adult stays was about five.

What does this mean to an individual's life? The figure below shows the history of placements over seven years for one young woman in the Pathways study. At the baseline interview she was 17 years old and in a juvenile facility. She then spent approximately four months in the community before returning to a juvenile facility, was transferred to an adult facility, and then went back to a juvenile facility before returning to the community. She then had three more adult jail stays during the follow-up period.

It is easy to imagine how this cycling in and out of placement can be trying for a developing young person. Moving from one place to another

**A SEVEN-YEAR HISTORY OF PLACEMENTS**  
Female, Age 17 at Enrollment in Pathways Study



disrupts potentially positive connections to peers, caring adults, and family. Adjusting to new and demanding institutional environments creates tremendous stress. But the transition from an institution to the community is also disruptive, and how that experience is handled makes a big difference to the individual's chances for success.

**Aftercare supervision and services are key to promoting positive community adjustment. Planning for them should begin on day one of an institutional stay.**

The first six months immediately following release set the stage for adolescents' future adjustment to community life. Not only are they now without the structure, daily supervision, and support of institutional settings, they are often returning to difficult family and community environments. If things go well in this initial period, they are much more likely to go well subsequently.<sup>4</sup> Planning for this period is thus a critical process—one that has to begin upon entry into a facility, continue throughout the stay, and be monitored effectively in the community.

Three major factors help to ensure a successful transition: a return to school or employment, involvement with community-based services, and adequate community supervision from the court. These activities not only reduce offending, they also promote positive development.

**Work and school.** Enrollment in school and employment are central markers of successful reentry, both for their long-term implications and because they are developmentally appropriate activities for this age group. But both can be a challenge for youth with offending histories.

According to one study, only 12 percent of formerly incarcerated adolescents received their high school diploma or GED as young adults.<sup>5</sup> This does not bode well for the long term, since educational attainment is strongly linked to both employment and earnings in adulthood.<sup>6</sup> As for work, during the first three years of follow-up the Pathways youth worked for only about one-third of their weeks in the community—mainly in short-term, menial jobs not leading to a career. Maintaining employment is a challenge for these young people.

The relationship between work and school, however, is complicated. While employment is a marker of a successful community transition, working *too much* (more than 20 hours a week) also has its downside. For nondelinquent youth about 16 years old, it is linked to declines in school engagement and increases in substance use and delinquency.<sup>7</sup> Similar patterns held among Pathways adolescents: working 20 hours or more per week or not at all, combined with not attending school regularly, was associated with more antisocial behavior.<sup>8</sup> Working some and going to school was associated with the lowest antisocial behavior.

**Community-based services.** Among the many challenges faced by adolescent offenders is a high rate of mental health disorders: about 50 to 70 percent of youth involved in the juvenile justice system have a diagnosable mental health condition.<sup>9</sup> In the Pathways study, substance use disorders were the most common, often combined with other disorders such as anxiety, ADHD, depression, and PTSD. These problems can interfere with participation in school and work, and complicate the many other challenges these youth face.

Addressing substance abuse and mental health problems is clearly a priority for juvenile justice service providers. But it is unrealistic to expect a youth to be “cured” during a stay in a juvenile facility. These conditions require on-going care, and while treatment can be started or maintained during a residential placement, it must continue at a community agency upon release.

It is therefore disappointing to see how low the levels of involvement with community-based services are among the Pathways adolescents. Only 30 percent of the adolescents with a diagnosable substance use disorder at the beginning of the study report getting a community-based service for this issue during the entire seven-year follow-up period. In another examination of Pathways youth, only about 35 percent reported using some type of community-based service during the six-month period after an institutional stay.<sup>10</sup> Yet these analyses also showed that contact with community-based treatment providers during this period greatly reduced the odds of being arrested or returning to institutional placement—a 12 percent reduction for each additional service contact per month. It is difficult to imagine a group more in need and more likely to benefit from community-based services.

Certainly, this group of adolescents is not easy to engage in voluntary treatment. Challenges range from immaturity, to practical problems like transportation, to family issues and ethnic barriers. But confronting these challenges would be effort well spent.

**Probation supervision.** Probation supervision is ubiquitous in juvenile justice. It occurs before, after, and in place of institutional placement.

Juvenile probation officers are gatekeepers to appropriate services and enforcers of court orders. Probation supervision is particularly important during the aftercare period, where it provides a bridge from daily observation in residential care to the eventual absence of court monitoring.

The Pathways study also found that both the duration and the intensity of supervision had a significant effect on outcomes in the six-month aftercare period.<sup>11</sup> During this time:

- Each additional month of supervision reduced the odds of being arrested or returning to institutional placement by 44 percent.
- Each additional month of supervision reduced the odds of engaging in self-reported antisocial activity by 53 percent.
- Each additional monthly contact with the probation officer increased the likelihood of being enrolled in school or being employed by 85 percent.

### **The system should use the aftercare period as an opportunity to promote positive development.**

While the juvenile justice system may reduce its reliance on institutional care, it will probably not abandon it, and a sizeable proportion of serious adolescent offenders will continue to cycle between placement and the community. Each placement introduces a new disruption in development, requiring a youth to “catch up” when he or she returns to the community. The challenge for the system is to make these reentry experiences drivers for positive change rather than setbacks. This

requires realistic and comprehensive plans to extend the support and services initiated during institutional care.

The best approach is to focus not just on monitoring offending behaviors but on enhancing positive development: by promoting school involvement and a reasonable amount of work, stabilizing employment, and building connections to appropriate community services—all practices that have been shown to have a positive impact when done soon after an institutional stay. In addition, the settings and activities in which adolescents participate during the reentry period—family, peer group, school, workplace—can be structured explicitly, from the beginning, as opportunities for development.<sup>12</sup> Using these settings to support positive role transitions should be an overarching goal of juvenile justice interventions throughout a youth’s involvement with the juvenile justice system, and particularly during aftercare.

## FURTHER READING

[“Examples of Models for Change-supported Activities Underway in Pennsylvania,”](#) (see in particular the Joint Policy statement on aftercare).

[“Juvenile Justice Aftercare Program Shows Success in Florida and Beyond,”](#) by Reclaiming Futures: Communities helping teens overcome alcohol and drugs.

[“Reentry and Aftercare: Juvenile Justice Guidebook for State Legislators,”](#) by the National Conference of State Legislatures.

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The Pathways to Desistance study is a multi-site, longitudinal study of serious adolescent offenders as they transition from adolescence into early adulthood. It is funded by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation in partnership with federal and state agencies and other foundations. For more information, contact Carol Schubert at [schubertca@upmc.edu](mailto:schubertca@upmc.edu), or visit the Pathways website, [www.pathwaysstudy.pitt.edu](http://www.pathwaysstudy.pitt.edu).

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**Models for Change: Systems Reform in Juvenile Justice**, launched in 2004, is a multi-state initiative working to guide and accelerate advances in juvenile justice, to make systems more fair, effective, rational, and developmentally appropriate.

The **Resource Center Partnership** is expanding the reach of the *Models for Change* initiative—its lessons, best practices, and knowledge built over a decade of work—to more local communities and states. The Partnership provides practitioners and policymakers with technical assistance, trainings, tools, and resources for juvenile justice reform.



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For young offenders who, for public safety reasons, cannot remain in the community, placement is still more than mere punishment. It is also an opportunity to provide services that address problem behaviors such as substance use, and to provide educational support or build vocational skills—in other words, to pave the way to positive development and a successful life.

But the impact of these services depends on how effectively they are continued and built on when the youth returns to the community. Four lessons have emerged from recent studies:

- Institutional placement is a repeated and disruptive event for serious adolescent offenders. Almost all youth will return to the community, where they will need ongoing support—including effective aftercare plans and services—to succeed in the long run.
- Planning for re-entry should be a goal of services from the first day of placement forward.
- Probation supervision and community-based services are both critical in the period right after an institutional stay. They reduce the chances of re-arrest and increase engagement in work and school.
- Major factors in a successful transition are involvement in developmentally appropriate activities, mainly school and work. Working too much without school involvement, though, is related to more offending.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

Juvenile justice systems should use the aftercare period as an opportunity to promote positive development and help adolescents succeed in the community.



## FURTHER READING

[“Examples of Models for Change-supported activities underway in Pennsylvania,”](#) (see in particular the Joint Policy statement on aftercare).

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