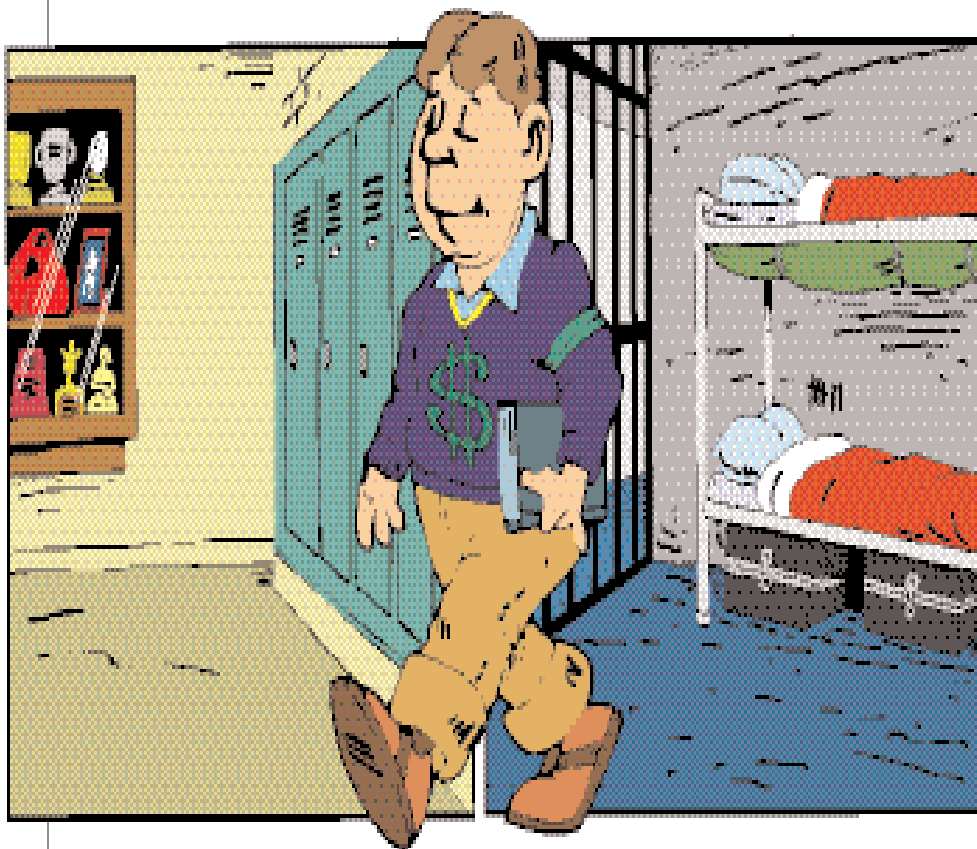


Out of Lock-Up: Now What?

A large number of youthful offenders released from confinement end up back in the system. Helping kids re-enter the community can help them stay out of trouble and save states money.

By Steve Christian



Johnny is a soft-spoken 19-year-old who is finishing a year at Lookout Mountain Youth Services Center in Golden, Colo., a high-security juvenile correctional facility that houses some of the state's toughest kids. He has a long arrest record for stealing and selling drugs. Before he came to Look-

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out Mountain, he escaped from a state institution in Pueblo, stole a car and was on the run for two years. In addition to his criminal record, he had a cocaine addiction and no high school diploma.

Johnny will be going home shortly, but his family will not be there to welcome him. His father is hiding from the law after violating parole; his younger sister ran

away from a group home; his older sister was recently arrested for selling drugs; his older brother is in prison; and he doesn't know where his mother is.

Despite all of this, Johnny has hope for the future. In the past year at Lookout, he earned his GED, kicked his drug habit and took vocational training. He plans to live with his girlfriend, with whom he fathered a child. He says her parents give him the support and guidance he never got from his own family.

But staying out of trouble will not be easy. His biggest challenge? "Drugs," he says without hesitation. "When I visit friends, I see them doing drugs. I see their parents doing drugs." Finding a decent job, he says, will be the best protection against relapse. That and regular contact with his probation officer.

The most important thing he got out of his stay at Lookout Mountain, he says, is the motivation to succeed. The big question for Johnny and for thousands of other young people leaving confinement is whether that newfound motivation can survive in rough neighborhoods where drugs, crime and unemployment are pervasive.

REDUCING RECIDIVISM

About 100,000 juvenile offenders are released every year, according to the Department of Justice. A large percentage of them had serious drug and mental health problems when they were incarcerated.

Kids in confinement are much more likely to have had serious problems with hard drugs, hallucinogens and designer drugs than are kids who get into trouble, but avoid incarceration, says Troy Armstrong at the Center for Delinquency and Crime Policy Studies, California State University. After release, many of them commit new crimes and end up back in jail. A Department of Justice study of prisoners released in 1994 found that more than 82 percent of those under age 18 were re-arrested within three years, and more than 55 percent were reconvicted.

Recidivism—returning to jail—is, of course, expensive. It costs about \$135 per day to keep a youthful offender incarcerated, according to the Department of Justice. But that is only part of the story. Arm-

strong says many released youths are chronic offenders who will go on to commit serious crimes that carry heavy costs. Reaching just a few of them can yield significant savings. The Florida Department of Juvenile Justice found that a 4 percent reduction in recidivism between FY 1997 and 1999 resulted in almost \$65 million in avoided costs to victims and criminal justice agencies.

Although practice varies from state to state, many juvenile justice systems focus much of their post-release efforts on surveillance and monitoring (in other words, checking to ensure the offender is meeting the conditions of release), rather than on supporting kids during the difficult process of returning to society. In many places, young people leave jail unprepared to make the transition from a highly structured institutional environment to an unstructured and often chaotic home environment. And there's not enough help for them in the community to reinforce any gains they made while in confinement.

Part of the problem is a lack of coordination among the juvenile justice, school, mental health, drug treatment and court systems.

Experts have long believed that helping kids adjust and get settled into a community is important in reducing recidivism. The Intensive Aftercare Program (IAP) developed over the past 15 years by Armstrong and David Altschuler of Johns Hopkins University is a widely recognized model that was tested at sites in three states over a five-year period. Key to the program are the intensive services juveniles get before release and once they return to the community. Kids get help with drug and alcohol addictions, mental health problems, job searches, parenting, housing and living on their own.

Costs vary. An analysis by the Washington State Institute for Public Policy estimated in 2002 that the state's intensive parole program, based on the IAP model, cost \$28.09 per day for an average of nine months (\$7,785), compared with \$12.22 per day for regular parole for lower risk youth.

Unfortunately, there are only a handful of studies on juvenile re-entry programs, and they have shown little or no effect on recidivism rates. The existing research, however, is largely inconclusive on whether these pro-

grams are worth the cost. Some of the studies suggest that the discouraging results could be due to poor implementation of otherwise theoretically sound models. The most comprehensive study of juvenile re-entry, the evaluation of IAP in Colorado, Nevada and Virginia will be released in early 2004. That study, says Armstrong, is inconclusive because of small sample sizes and gaps in data collection. Another evaluation that is just getting started will likely yield more useful information. That study will be examining outcomes of a program run by the Boys and Girls Clubs of America called the Targeted Re-Entry Project, an 11-site pilot project based on the IAP model.

THE SERIOUS AND VIOLENT OFFENDER RE-ENTRY INITIATIVE

Every state except Nebraska has applied for grants of about \$2 million under the federal Serious and Violent Offender Re-Entry Initiative to develop and enhance plans for released inmates. States are using this money to provide a wide variety of re-entry services for both adult and juvenile offenders, including intensive case management and monitoring, substance abuse treatment, mentoring, life skills training, employment assistance, transitional housing, and faith-based support. States have a great deal of flexibility in designing their programs, but must address the three phases of offender re-entry: pre-release, transition and long-term support.

David Bennett, central region director for the Colorado Division of Youth Corrections, believes the IAP experiment in Colorado was well worth the effort, even if he can't document a significant reduction in recidivism.

"It accomplished a major culture change within Lookout Mountain," he says. "When kids are in an institution, it's easy to keep everything under the control of the institution. IAP made us do a better job of working with organizations in the community" to prepare kids for release. "It's also made the campus much more family friendly." Bennett believes the most important part of re-entry planning is supporting families and helping them take the lead role in a juvenile's return to the community.

Another unexpected benefit of the Colorado pilot program was a reduction in lengths of stay. "The experimental group left the institution an average of three months sooner than the control group," says Bennett. "That has resulted in cost savings for the state."

A NEW FOCUS ON SCHOOL

Education for young ex-offenders is getting more attention at both the state and federal levels. Although national data are hard to come by, anecdotal evidence suggests that youths leaving detention do poorly in school and often drop out.

In 1997, the California Legislature created grants for county offices of education to support comprehensive, multi-agency plans for first-time juvenile offenders on probation and those coming from county-run juvenile camps, ranches and halls.

The program, known as the High-Risk Youth Education and Public Safety Program, has been "very successful," according to Bill Lane, education programs consultant for the state Department of Education. The final evaluation of the program by Armstrong and his colleagues at California State University will not be completed until early next year. Preliminary results, however, "are looking promising," says Armstrong. "They show a marked reduction in the level of risk factors" that affect school attendance, drop-out rates and academic performance, he says. He also notes that the early findings suggest a reduction in recidivism among young people participating in the project.

At the suggestion of a legislatively mandated task force, Maine passed a measure in 2001 to improve the success of juvenile offenders returning to local schools. Phil McCarthy, a legislative analyst who staffed the task force, says one of the major barriers was reluctance of schools to accept ex-offenders without having sufficient information about their substance abuse and mental health histories. The legislation requires the development of statewide standards for enrolling juvenile offenders in local school systems. It also calls for the creation of teams to help the process.

Education for youthful offenders is a major emphasis of Title I, Part D, of the No Child Left Behind Act, which provides about \$48 million for children who are

neglected, delinquent or at-risk. States must use between 15 percent and 30 percent of their grants to help young offenders get back in school successfully or get college or vocational training if they have graduated.

THE IMPORTANCE OF ENGAGEMENT

Researchers at the University of Oregon recently studied more than 500 young people who were released from the custody of the Oregon Youth Authority. More than half had a special education disability, and about 40 percent also had a psychiatric disability. The study, known as the TRACS Project, confirmed high recidivism and low employment and school enrollment rates, particularly for the kids with disabilities.

The study also contained some good news. If a young offender remained in the community for one year following release, it was *virtually certain* that he would not return to the correctional system. Moreover, young offenders who had become “engaged” in work or school immediately after release tended to stay out of trouble at much higher rates than those who did not. These positive effects were especially pronounced for kids with disabilities.

From the TRACS study evolved Oregon’s Project SUPPORT, which provides individualized services to incarcerated youths with disabilities. A transition specialist helps each kid get into school or find a job quickly after release. Although the program has not been rigorously evaluated, a look at statistics is encouraging. Data from April 2003 show that 68.2 percent of Project SUPPORT participants were in school or had a job at six months after getting out, with only 16.6 percent back in custody, compared with 46.7 percent and 29.3 percent, respectively, of youths in the TRACS study.

“We are encouraged by the early data on Project SUPPORT and are looking forward to a more complete evaluation,” says Ore-

gon Representative Max Williams. “It’s really common sense that with no job or no assistance in getting back to school, a lot of these kids will fall back into the same behaviors that got them into custody in the first place. While transition services are expensive, in the long run we hope they will improve the future for these young people, reduce victimization and save money on future costs of custody.”

JUVENILE RE-ENTRY COURTS

Another approach that is beginning to attract more attention is the juvenile re-entry court. Like drug courts, re-entry courts involve close collaboration among all participants, active involvement of the judge in the juvenile’s progress, support and treatment services, frequent court appearances, and an array of rewards and penalties.

Although juvenile re-entry courts are fairly new, a number of states have established or authorized them for adult offenders. Nevada, for example, enacted legislation in 2001 authorizing judicial districts to set up adult re-entry courts. Other jurisdictions, such as Fort Wayne, Ind., have demonstrated significant reductions in adult recidivism with judge-centered programs.

Judge Phil Jordan and Barbara Templeton, who work with kids after their release, created the country’s first juvenile re-entry court in Keyser, W.Va., in 1999. Both of them were frustrated with the results of traditional aftercare. “We have excellent juvenile facilities in West Virginia, and kids come out of them with a different attitude,” says Jordan. “But I saw a hole in the system. After six months with their old friends and family, many of whom have their own problems with drugs and crime, they are back before me again. You feel like all the resources that have been used to help the juvenile have been wasted.”

Unlike most juvenile courts, young people in Judge Jordan’s re-entry court regularly appear before him, rather than a probation officer. He says that such frequent appearances seem to make a difference. “The offender never forgets that it is the judge who has the ultimate power to send him away,” he says. The court also employs a case manager to work more closely with juveniles than do probation officers.

Although he doesn’t have data to show a

reduction in recidivism, Jordan echoes Bennett in Colorado that early pre-release planning and services often lead to shorter and therefore less costly sentences. In West Virginia, certain juveniles are eligible for early release if they get intensive help in preparing to return to society.

THE EFFECT OF BUDGET CUTS

Like other programs, transition services for juvenile offenders in many states have been hurt by budget cuts. Colorado’s budget for juvenile re-entry was reduced from \$4 million to \$1 million for FY 2004, Bennett says. The state Division of Youth Corrections is using federal money, including \$900,000 from the Serious and Violent Offender Re-Entry Initiative and U.S. Department of Labor funds, to make up the shortfall.

California’s educational transition program for high-risk juvenile offenders made it into the FY 2004 budget, but state funding was cut from \$18 million to \$11 million.

Budget cuts in Oregon have reduced the participants in Project SUPPORT from 225 to 161 per year. Unfortunately, most of Oregon’s federal funds are earmarked for adult male offenders.

Until recently, Jordan’s court operated with no additional funds. He now has just under \$1 million from a federal initiative to expand the program, hire additional caseworkers and acquire transitional housing.

THE CHALLENGE OF RE-ENTRY

Sending juveniles back to the community is a challenge, both for the kids who leave institutions and for the public systems that are responsible for reducing juvenile crime. For young offenders, going home means facing the temptation of drugs and crime. For the juvenile justice system, it means coordinating the efforts of agencies and systems that don’t often work together. Bennett, for one, thinks the effort is worth it. “In spite of our best efforts, we think it’s pretty certain that this population is a public safety risk,” he says. “Many of them have missed out on the normal process of socialization. Even people with good family resources aren’t fully independent until their mid-20s. Our kids have weak parental support. We’ve got to prop them up.”



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