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Making the right turn : A research update on evidence-based and promising post-exit supports for formerly incarcerated youth

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Making the Right Turn: A Research Update on Evidence-Based and Promising Post-Exit Supports for Formerly Incarcerated Youth

The juvenile justice system, in its origins, was designed to meet the unique needs of youth who committed law violations. The underlying premise is that the rehabilitation of youth would ultimately lead to reintegration into school, community, and the workforce, as well as avoidance of future involvement with the juvenile or adult justice systems. Supports provided to youth may occur within the community to prevent youth law violations and/or to support law-violating youth in the event they are diverted to services other than residential placement. The ongoing provision of supports and services for youth who are incarcerated, theoretically provide the assistance and learning necessary for youth to reintegrate. Lastly, youth success post-incarceration requires ongoing support within the community.¹

This is the third research brief published by the National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth (NCWD/Youth) as a follow-up to the 2008 guide, [*Making the Right Turn: A Guide about Improving Transition Outcomes for Youth Involved in the Juvenile Corrections System*](#).² The first two research briefs focus on updates to evidence-based and promising practices for prevention and diversion,³ as well as transition supports for youth while incarcerated.⁴ The purpose of the current brief is to identify evidence-based and promising post-exit supports for formerly incarcerated youth. This brief is organized

according to NCWD/Youth's [*Guideposts for Success*](#), a national research-based framework that identifies what all youth need for successful transition to adulthood within the following five areas:

- 1. School-Based Preparatory Experiences:** In order to perform at optimal levels in all education settings, all youth need to participate in educational programs grounded in standards, clear performance expectations, and graduation exit options based upon meaningful, accurate, and relevant indicators of student learning and skills.
- 2. Career Preparation and Work-Based Learning Experiences:** Career preparation and work-based learning experiences are essential in order to form and develop aspirations and to make informed choices about careers. These experiences can be provided during the school day, through afterschool programs, and in community-based non-school settings. They require collaboration among various organizations including employers.
- 3. Youth Development and Leadership Opportunities:** Youth development is a process that prepares young people to meet the challenges of adolescence and adulthood through a coordinated, progressive series of activities and

experiences that help them gain skills and competencies. Youth leadership is part of that process.

4. Connecting Activities (Support and Community Services): Young people need to be connected to programs, services, activities, and supports that help them gain access to chosen post-school options.

5. Family Involvement and Supports: Participation and involvement of parents, family members, and/or other caring adults promote the social, emotional, physical, academic, and occupational growth of youth, leading to better post-school outcomes.

When discussing services for youth who have been released from incarceration, it is important to note that problems that could have or should have been addressed prior to or during incarceration often remain. Given the current state of services within juvenile correctional facilities, youth commonly exit having received a subpar education and special education services,⁵ minimal mental health services,⁶ harsh punishments and exclusion that could cause additional trauma,⁷ minimal career and technical education,⁸ and uncoordinated transition supports.⁹ Moreover, it is unequivocal that a disproportionate percentage of youth continue to have wide-ranging needs after their incarceration related to the following:

- An educational disability (e.g., emotional disturbance (ED), learning disabilities (LD)) and a history of school failure;¹⁰
- Mental health conditions, including substance use disorders;¹¹
- Trauma, including abuse, neglect, and witnessing violence;¹²
- Engagement with multiple agencies;¹³ and
- Limited familial support and an inability to access community supports.¹⁴

The necessity of post-exit supports is noted within U.S. Department of Justice and U.S. Department of Education guidance documents.¹⁵ The urgency of providing post-exit supports and services is further supported when we consider that approximately three-fourths of incarcerated youth recidivate within three years.¹⁶ There are concerns that aftercare interventions have limited effects on recidivism, particularly for younger youth.¹⁷ Additionally, researchers have noted limitations to the existing research base, as well as methodological limitations and a frequent reliance on recidivism as the sole outcome measure for many studies.¹⁸ Nonetheless, evidence-based and promising practices do exist that can provide practical guidance to those who are faced with the daily challenge of providing post-exit supports to youth, their families, and concerned adults.

GUIDEPOST 1: SCHOOL-BASED PREPARATORY EXPERIENCES

In order to perform at optimal levels in all education settings, all youth need to participate in educational programs grounded in standards, clear performance expectations, and graduation exit options based upon meaningful, accurate, and relevant indicators of student learning and skills.

Among the many challenges young offenders face upon release is their reengagement with educational systems. Most enter incarceration with disproportionate educational deficiencies and histories of poor school performance.¹⁹ Despite the potential for educational and related services delivered during



confinement to rehabilitate their academic deficiencies, clear indications exist that poor school performance and achievement are exacerbated for many youth during and after their incarceration.²⁰ Moreover, disrupted services during and after confinement can contribute to their increased risk for school dropout upon release. In fact, more than two-thirds of youth released from secure facilities will not re-enroll in school.²¹

For some youth, obstacles to re-enrollment include educators' perceptions and their self-perceptions of their ability to achieve academic standards and comply with behavioral expectations. Specifically, students who are disconnected from the curriculum due to incarceration are often viewed (and view themselves) as unlikely achievers, may be actively discouraged from participating in testing, and experience repetitive disciplinary actions that result in their social exclusion from peers.²² Available information suggests that 38% of districts with alternative schools and programs automatically transfer students to these settings solely on the basis of arrest or involvement with the juvenile justice system.²³ Many of these alternative schools have lower rates of graduation and student achievement than non-alternative school settings.²⁴

Despite the frequent use of alternative schools as a placement for youth exiting juvenile justice facilities, little is known about the instruction and services provided in these settings.²⁵ Moreover, some researchers have raised concerns about the quality of academic and behavioral programming in these schools²⁶ and note that their operation outside of common oversight mechanisms may result in a lack of adherence to federal policy and inconsistent implementation of evidence-based educational practices.²⁷

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Given that the majority of youth do not return to their local or community school, do not earn General Educational Development (GED) certification, or do not obtain a high school diploma during incarceration, there is an apparent need to understand the educational and transition services provided by alternative schools that accept these students upon their release. Post-exit, youth require immediate engagement with school. Their school engagement impacts youth's future success, as those that remain engaged six months following release are 2.5 times more likely to remain engaged at 12 months post-exit.²⁸ Youth success is also impacted by the existence of: (a) knowledgeable and qualified teachers; (b) access to an age-appropriate curriculum and evidence-based literacy, mathematics, and behavioral instruction; and, (c) expeditious transfer of educational records stipulating their progress and needed supports.

First, given substantial academic deficits and gaps in learning, youth in alternative schools require knowledgeable and qualified teachers that can effectively and precisely support their learning. In a study using nationally



representative data,²⁹ researchers reported that many teachers in secondary exclusionary schools, which include alternative schools, have insufficient content area preparation and few are certified and prepared in special education. Other researchers³⁰ have raised similar concerns that teachers in alternative schools may be unaware of evidence-based instructional practices, particularly for teaching literacy and mathematics. Research on other types of exclusionary schools, including juvenile corrections schools, has also revealed that teachers do not use evidence-based practices for teaching literacy and math, or they use such practices in a manner that lacks integrity to key components (i.e., specific aspects of explicit instruction). When evidence-based practices are used, it is often so infrequently that the benefit to students is minimal.³¹

Researchers have also noted that curriculum in exclusionary settings is often unrelated to grade level expectations and state assessments.³² In national surveys of principals, approximately 40% reported that math curriculum and 37% reported that reading/English curriculum were only somewhat aligned to state assessments. Forty-two percent of principals indicated that the instructional materials used in their school were only somewhat aligned with state assessments and about 50% reported being provided professional development that focused on aligning curriculum and state assessment only “somewhat or very little.” In addition, only 33% of principals believed that grade level expectations should apply to every student, including youth with disabilities. State level research involving alternative schools corroborates reports that curriculum is commonly individualized and not necessarily based on district or state curriculum or state assessments.³³

In many cases, incarcerated youth’s cumulative disadvantages contribute to low rates of high school credential attainment.

To address issues with instruction and ensure the use of evidence-based practices, a tiered intervention program, modeled after Response to Intervention (RtI) can be used (see the brief, [Making the Right Turn: A Research Update on Prevention and Diversion for Justice Involved Youth](#)). RtI is an intervention/prevention system grounded in data-based decision making that uses screening and progress monitoring assessments embedded in a multi-level system of student supports to improve student outcomes. Use of RtI is beneficial for justice-involved youth in that it facilitates students’ receipt of appropriate educational supports and accelerates intervention delivery to fill learning gaps and to accumulate credits.³⁴

In many cases, incarcerated youth’s cumulative disadvantages (e.g., histories of educational neglect, learning disabilities, poor school records, and school transience) contribute to low rates of high school credential attainment (e.g. diploma, GED). The expeditious transfer of youth’s educational records can ensure instructional continuity and the appropriate provision of support services that are critical to their success (see [Figure 1](#)).³⁵ Formal transfer mechanisms may include a memoranda of understanding (MOU) or agreement; written State, district, or agency policy; or even State and/ or local legislation requiring that schools release a youth’s education records within a short, specified timeframe. While research on the use of formal agreements for records



FIGURE 1. EXPEDITIOUS TRANSFER OF EDUCATIONAL RECORDS

School systems must establish formal mechanisms for the timely and complete transfer of pertinent educational data and records for system-involved youth. Information that should be included in all record transfers include:

- Date(s) of enrollment;
- Date(s) of termination of educational services;
- IEP and/or 504 Plans, as necessary;
- Any applicable academic, behavioral, and health screenings and assessments;
- State accountability test results;
- Transcript(s) of academic progress and achievement; and
- Career and Technical Education certificates.

transfer is thus far relegated to isolated program evaluations (see Project Connect³⁶), this mechanism has been recommended elsewhere³⁷ and future research is needed.

Given known barriers to successful transition, all educational settings that receive at-risk students need to have transition supports and activities in place for both departing and arriving students. One logical step is to include transition activities in students' personalized learning plans (PLPs). The National Technical Assistance Center for the Education of Neglected or Delinquent Children and Youth (NDTAC) recommended the use of PLPs in their practice guide on providing individually tailored academic and behavioral support service to youth in juvenile justice and child welfare systems.³⁸ Similar to Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) for youth with disabilities, PLPs offer a mechanism to monitor and systematically assess student progress and create educational plans based on that data. To date, while no formal research

investigations have provided evidence for the effectiveness of PLPs at post-exit. However, this practice shows promise for supporting effective reintegration of youth in the education system.

GUIDEPOST 2: CAREER PREPARATION AND WORK-BASED LEARNING EXPERIENCES

Career preparation and work-based learning experiences are essential in order to form and develop aspirations and to make informed choices about careers. These experiences can be provided during the school day, through afterschool programs, and in community-based non-school settings. They require collaboration among various organizations including employers.



There is a clear need for youth to have access to career and technical education and career opportunities post-exit.³⁹ For many youth, having a job upon release reduces their chances of recidivism by two-thirds.⁴⁰ However, only about one-third of youth are employed or in school one year following incarceration.⁴¹ It is important to note that the benefits of job experience for post-exit youth are related to a youth's age. That is, for younger students, attending school regularly is a stronger predictor of reduced antisocial behavior;⁴² for older youth, career and technical education in school is likely to be more beneficial. Youth exiting school while transitioning to adulthood will experience great social gains from a supported work experience that is provided independent from or in combination with educational services. For older youth, employment can provide "opportunities for pro-social engagement" (p. 1792),⁴³ which in turn may reduce the likelihood of recidivism.

Research focused on effective and promising post-exit career and technical education and career opportunities is almost non-existent. However, many of the strategies highlighted in [Making the Right Turn: A Research Update on Prevention and Diversion for Justice-Involved Youth](#)⁴⁴ remain relevant for youth post-exit, including: (a) ensuring job training adheres to industry-based standards and results in certification; and (b) youth have supported employment opportunities, which includes job coaches and a consistent schedule. Similarly, strategies noted in [Making the Right Turn: A Guide about Improving Transition Outcomes for Youth Involved in the Juvenile Corrections System](#)⁴⁵ are applicable to post-exit youth, including: (a) utilizing the Common Career Technical Core standards;⁴⁶ (b) providing youth with ongoing training to update skills and knowledge; and (c) supporting youth to complete identified programs of study

or pathways. It is also important to consider that formerly incarcerated youth have certain unique needs, such as career planning that includes discussions with youth on how to mention their incarceration with employers and legal aid to assist in getting records expunged.⁴⁷

More guidance on evidence-based and promising programs may be available in the future through pilot efforts funded by the U.S. Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration's Reentry Employment Opportunities (REO) program.⁴⁸ REO provides funding to support pilot programs for justice-involved youth and some grant opportunities are appropriate for post-exit programs, including efforts that support youth. In particular, five federal funding opportunities may yield data that will guide future interventions and program development: (a) Face Forward Intermediary and Community Grants (ends 2018); (b) Job ChalleNGe Grants (ends 2018); (c) Pathways to Justice Careers for Youth (ends 2019); and (d) Reentry Demonstration Projects for Young Adults (ends 2022) (see [Figure 2](#)).⁴⁹ While the grant funding is ending, there is the prospect that some positive results will be forthcoming.

While there is no rigorous research base to support their use, American Job Centers, previously known as One-Stop Career Centers, are a useful resource for post-exit youth, families, and supporting professionals. The One-Stop Career Centers "often serve as the engine for the workforce development field by helping to provide the majority of employment-related services in many jurisdictions" (p. 4).⁵⁰

Youth may also benefit from free online tools for exploring career options including My Next Move (<https://www.mynextmove.org/>), which was developed with support from



the U.S. Department of Labor/Employment and Training Administration. My Next Move provides easy-to-understand directions and practical guidance for career planning and obtaining a job. Specifically, the website assists youth in identifying a career of interest using an interest assessment. Youth can view occupation profiles (including pay, education needed, characteristics of typical work day, likelihood of job openings in the geographical area) and set career goals. Potential jobs are sorted by those that require little or no preparation, some preparation, medium preparation, high preparation, and extensive preparation. Youth are also guided to make a training plan based on information provided, including occupation profiles, the education needed for a specific occupation, the availability of training opportunities in the geographical area, and funding to pay for education and training. As youth move to

the stage of applying for a job, the website offers guidance in organizing needed work documents, developing a resume, support to answer common interview questions, and approaches to finding job openings.

Given the lack of research on career preparation and work-based learning specifically involving post-exit youth, professionals working with this population may find it helpful to consider strategies recommended by research on prevention and diversion programs, as well as those serving incarcerated youth. Findings from the REO programs may yield more specific guidance for serving post-exit youth in the future. Additional research is needed on the benefits to youth of using resources offered by American Job Centers and online tools, such as My Next Move.

FIGURE 2. REENTRY EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES FUNDING¹¹⁹

Face Forward Intermediary and Community Grants: Projects support youth via: (a) expungement of records; (b) job skills and training in high-demand occupations; (c) industry-recognized credentials; (d) employment opportunities; and (e) contacts to obtain supportive services.

Job ChalleNGe Grants: Programs expand current collaborative efforts with the National Guard and provides education, vocational training, and technical skills to youth that have exited school without a diploma.

Pathways to Justice Careers for Youth: Grants include a focus on youth with previous involvement with the juvenile justice system and those in alternative schools (a common placement for post-exit youth). The emphasis is on career exploration in the justice and emergency service fields.

Reentry Demonstration Projects for Young Adults: Supports both youth and adults who have been incarcerated. Programs implement evidence-based and promising practices to support employment. The grants must focus on communities with high-crime and high-poverty.



GUIDEPOST 3: YOUTH DEVELOPMENT AND LEADERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES

Youth development is a process that prepares young people to meet the challenges of adolescence and adulthood through a coordinated, progressive series of activities and experiences that help them gain skills and competencies. Youth leadership is part of that process.

Programs that focus on the development and internalization of basic life and social skills can be highly beneficial for youth leaving confinement facilities. These programs serve as a way to assist youth in preparing to return to the community and teach skills that may have a positive impact on a youth's behavior and progress upon exit from confinement. The implementation of social skills programs can occur while youth are still in confinement settings, including juvenile detention and corrections, as well as adult correctional facilities. Facilities that place a strong emphasis on a youth's successful reentry to the community typically invest in the process of teaching basic life and related social skills.

While there are numerous examples of effective and promising life skills training programs, few have been evaluated for their effectiveness as a component of successful re-entry of juveniles into the community. Operation New Hope (formerly called Lifeskills '95) is a curriculum-based treatment program designed to facilitate the reintegration of high-risk juveniles into the community upon their release.⁵¹ The program teaches social-emotional learning skills through weekly

group meetings. In one study,⁵² 53% of youth in the control group had some form of parole failure, compared with 35% of the youth who participated in Operation New Hope (the experimental group). The juveniles who participated in the program were also significantly less likely to have been arrested or to have used drugs or alcohol, were more likely to be employed (full or part-time) and displayed significant improvements in their social behavior.

Developing youths' social skills can also be an effective way to support their reintegration. Again, few programs have focused on the development of these skills during the post-exit period, and those programs that exhibit promising effects on recidivism have existed for more than 15 years. The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention's Model Program guide reflects only two such programs – Project BUILD (Broader Urban Involvement and Leadership Development) and Equipping Youth to Help One Another (EQUIP). These programs incorporate explicit instruction in areas such as self-esteem enhancement, communication skills, social skills, moral reasoning, and decision making. Evaluations of these multicomponent treatment programs⁵³ indicate participating youth had significantly lower rates of recidivism, and those youth who did recidivate showed longer periods prior to re-offense. However, neither treatment has been tested by more than a single evaluation and further evidence is needed to warrant claims of effectiveness.

Various research studies indicate providing mentoring as part of reentry services results in positive, long-term effects on youth development.⁵⁴ When mentoring services are provided via community-based aftercare and reentry programs, a clear goal of these services is to reduce recidivism.⁵⁵ Interviews



with adolescents involved in the reentry process have revealed that the trusting relationships they formed with one or more adults in the juvenile justice system during their mentorship had important implications for their recidivism.⁵⁶ Researchers note that mentoring relationships, which are often novel to justice-involved youth, provide unique opportunities for juveniles to share their feelings and seek guidance. Moreover, researchers have noted that mentoring programs can facilitate youth's school and community engagement, as well as their access to needed services and employment opportunities.⁵⁷ For example, Aftercare for Indiana through Mentoring program (AIM) is one large-scale, comprehensive reentry program for juveniles that involves life skills training and the establishment of positive adult mentoring relationships. Researchers reported that youth who participated in AIM had a lower reincarceration rate (43%) over a four-year follow-up period compared to a non-mentored youth (62% reincarcerated).⁵⁸

GUIDEPOST 4: CONNECTING ACTIVITIES (SUPPORT AND COMMUNITY SERVICES)

Young people need to be connected to programs, services, activities, and supports that help them gain access to chosen post-school options.

Youth returning to the community face a variety of challenges that can affect reintegration. Researchers emphasize the need for clear communication among the different agencies and individuals involved in a youths' reintegration from exclusionary

settings to their schools and communities.⁵⁹ Youth can be supported by a variety of agencies and persons during their transition process, including but not limited to family and other supportive adults, juvenile probation or parole officers, residential staff, mental and behavioral health service providers, and other community-based treatment providers, including schools. As noted in the recent brief, [Making the Right Turn: A Research Update on Improving Transition Outcomes among Youth involved in the Juvenile Corrections System](#),⁶⁰ there is often a lack of coordination and collaboration across these individuals and systems, leading to fragmented or inconsistent supports for reintegration with the youth's families, schools, neighborhoods, and communities. Nonetheless, effective cross-agency collaboration can ensure that youth receive necessary aftercare services to increase their chances of avoiding re-offense.

To facilitate cross-agency collaboration, aftercare services need to be planned for and systematically coordinated. Because juvenile sentences are generally a few months in length,⁶¹ the development of pre-release plans should occur as quickly as possible upon youth's confinement.⁶² Effective transition programs are characterized by their initiation upon release and a duration of six months or more, and generally include additional follow-up lasting at least one year.⁶³ Youth's secure placement should be integrally connected to and informed by their release plan and modified throughout the duration of their confinement. Moreover, while the coordination of aftercare services is most likely to be effective when managed by the correctional facility,⁶⁴ various case management and coordinated systems frameworks (e.g., needs-based case management, wraparound services) may be considered to support



youth's successful transition beginning during confinement and continuing post-exit.

Needs-based case management of juveniles in the justice system follows a risk-needs-responsivity framework and involves the identification of a juvenile's recidivism risk. Upon identification of risk, professionals evaluate specific factors (e.g., criminogenic needs) that must be addressed to decrease that risk, and various individual factors, such as cognitive ability that may influence treatment outcomes.⁶⁵ For youth returning to the community, case management should involve the application of risk-needs assessment instruments to identify a targeted treatment plan that can be modified in light of changes in the juvenile's needs and risks.⁶⁶ Since released youth frequently exhibit an inability to navigate multiple systems and access community services, needs-based case management can facilitate the integration of these systems for youth.⁶⁷

While the case management process should be guided by a focus on youth's risk and needs, it should also facilitate provision of needed treatment and services. In a study⁶⁸ examining the implementation of case management approaches used with youth in the juvenile justice system, researchers found that, even though probation officers providing case management identified youth's needs, youth did not always receive the commensurate, appropriate services to mitigate those needs. Only 42% of youth who had education or employment needs received corresponding services. Matched services were provided for only 21% of those with identified substance use needs and only 32% of those who needed family services. Overall, more rigorous research is needed on the effects of needs-based case management for post-exit youth.

Wraparound services support youth's ability to remain in the least restrictive environment through intensive coordination of multiple services.⁶⁹ In the juvenile justice system, wraparound has generally been used as a way to divert youth from detention, but the process has also assisted in providing coordinated services to youth as they transition back into the community following placement in secure residential facilities.⁷⁰ The wraparound process provides coordination across the various agencies (e.g., juvenile justice and child welfare systems), so that youth receive the seamless services they need without complication.

Washington State's Connections[®] program is a wraparound program for youth up to age 18 with mental health conditions that has been extensively studied.⁷¹ Families are assigned to a team of professionals that includes a mental health care coordinator, a probation counselor, a family assistance specialist, and a juvenile services associate for mentoring and aid with the treatment plan.⁷² Due to their involvement in Connections[®], youth served less time, and were less likely to recidivate as compared to untreated youth. Other programs that have shown promise in reducing recidivism include the Dawn Project⁷³ and Wraparound Milwaukee.⁷⁴ An evaluation of Wraparound Milwaukee with 141 court-ordered youth produced positive effects for educational outcomes and police contacts, but not for arrests or incarceration.⁷⁵

Overall, evidence suggests that implementing a wraparound process may have positive benefits for juvenile justice-involved youth. However, there is a need for more rigorous evaluation research on the effectiveness of the wraparound process, including a specific need for research concentrating on older transition age (over age 17) youth and to consider the continuity of such services delivered post-



exit. For example, although Wraparound Milwaukee is well known for employing the wraparound approach system, a rigorous experimental or quasi-experimental study has not yet been undertaken to examine the program's impact on youth. In a meta-analysis of outcome studies examining the effectiveness of the wraparound process, researchers concluded that "the wraparound process shows modest evidence of both efficacy and effectiveness, but does not meet the strict criteria for evidence-based treatments (EBTs)" (p. 346).⁷⁶ Future research is needed to consider additional components that may facilitate the reintegration of post-exit youth and plans to ensure wraparound services are individualized, while maintaining implementation fidelity of key components.

Because mental health and substance use disorders can increase both the likelihood and speed of recidivism among juveniles,⁷⁷ individualized treatment is an important component of a youth's successful community reentry. Research suggests that targeted reentry services, which include a thorough assessment of juveniles' mental health and substance use treatment needs, can reduce recidivism.⁷⁸ In addition, several treatment types and programs have shown promise when included in aftercare programming, including those based on cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT). When used as a component of reentry programming, CBT encourages the development of thinking skills that will help youth to succeed beyond coping in the environment of residential facilities.⁷⁹ CBT is most effective when interventions involve components provided in both residential and community contexts. For example, when provided CBT that included both residential and community components, youth have been found to be significantly less likely to use drugs, be re-arrested, or stop attending school at six months post-release compared

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to youth who were only provided the interventions while in residential treatment programs.⁸⁰ Other programs involve the family in applying CBT strategies, and some of the model programs that have proven successful in this area include Functional Family Therapy, Multisystemic Therapy, and the Michigan State Diversion Project. These programs are described in other briefs in the Making the Right Turn series.

For those youth requiring residential substance treatment programs, therapeutic communities promote substance use recovery through group living in a structured environment that allows them to share emotions and problems.⁸¹ Therapeutic communities differ from other treatment models due to an emphasis on recovery and community as the driver of lifestyle change.⁸² Social learning is used to modify youth's attitudes, thought patterns, and behaviors⁸³ with a priority on supporting the integration of healthy thinking and behavior patterns into youth's post-exit routines.⁸⁴ The evidence for therapeutic communities is sparse and



in some cases, conflicting reports of results are evident. For example, researchers⁸⁵ investigating the effects of therapeutic communities across studies in which the intervention was used with incarcerated juveniles found no significant differences in youth recidivism between treated and untreated youth. An independent study⁸⁶ of the impact of incarceration-based therapeutic communities on juvenile recidivism also found no significant differences in post-release recidivism across three separate studies. Because these cross-study analyses involved only a limited number of studies, it remains relatively difficult to interpret and apply the results of the studies to youth transition and reentry.

GUIDEPOST 5: FAMILY INVOLVEMENT AND SUPPORTS

Participation and involvement of parents, family members, and/or other caring adults promote the social, emotional, physical, academic, and occupational growth of youth, leading to better post-school outcomes.

Youth and other stakeholders have emphasized the importance of a youth's family during reintegration and the positive impact of having a supportive family, rather than a dysfunctional home.⁸⁷ When youth do not have the option to return to their family or the situation is unstable and/or abusive, they may rely on supportive housing and shelters that are often located in low-income areas with few job opportunities, which may further exacerbate youth's risk for homelessness.⁸⁸ Although data are limited, in Minnesota, 25%

of youth under age 17, and 37% of young adults ages 18-24 had spent time in a juvenile correctional facility.⁸⁹ Homelessness carries associated risks including substance abuse, physical health risks, and victimization.⁹⁰ Researchers have reported that 25% of youth exiting juvenile detention, group homes, or foster care stayed on the street or in a shelter during their first night post-release.⁹¹ While similar data are not available for committed youth, it is safe to assume this population displays a similar level of risk for immediate homelessness.

In particular, youth need emotional support from their families and a stable living situation. Family support is important for all youth, but it is acutely important for younger juveniles who are perhaps more affected by the family domain than older youth.⁹² A stable living condition is critical given that, in post-exit, 65% of youth obtain money from family and friends, while only 34% earn wages from a formal job.⁹³ However, difficulties can arise for families when youth return to their home. In some jurisdictions, for example, families must leave public housing if a formerly incarcerated youth returns to live with them.⁹⁴

Even without additional complications, familial support is not always present or positive and may lead to a situation where youth lose social and behavioral gains made while incarcerated.⁹⁵ Family problems may contribute to a youth's law violating behavior and upon return to the family this situation, as well as family issues with poverty, substance abuse, and/or poor health, may continue to be negative factors.⁹⁶ Without outside counseling and support, parents may feel skeptical that their child is committed to changing their law violating behavior and may have unrealistic expectations or place impractical restrictions on the youth.⁹⁷ While family interventions or treatment may mitigate some of these



difficulties, maintaining family involvement in treatment is a significant challenge.⁹⁸

Programs that support youth and their families as a method of prevention or diversion are also applicable for formerly incarcerated youth post-exit. As noted in the brief, [*Making the Right Turn: A Research Update on Improving Transition Outcomes among Youth Involved in the Juvenile Corrections System*](#),⁹⁹ family therapy and supports, such as Multisystemic Therapy, Functional Family Therapy, Multidimensional Family Therapy, and Parenting with Love and Limits are among the most effective family approaches. Family approaches are more effective in preventing recidivism than interventions that focus solely on the youth.¹⁰⁰ Given that a disproportionate number of formerly incarcerated youth have experienced abuse and/or neglect and go on to be adult perpetrators of child maltreatment, it is also possible that formalized family interventions may stem this risk.¹⁰¹ However, research has not evaluated

the aforementioned family interventions with regard to post-exit youth perpetration of child maltreatment later in life.

Family Integrated Transitions (FIT) is a promising intervention that begins during the last two months of incarceration and continues after release.¹⁰² The National Institute of Justice, Office of Justice Programs describes FIT as a family-based intervention for youth under the age of 18 who are at the end of their incarceration or recently released. Other criteria include having a substance use disorder and “any of the following: any Axis 1 disorder, currently prescribed psychotropic medication, or demonstrated suicidal behavior within the past 3 months.”¹⁰³ FIT continues for 4-6 months post-exit. As noted in Figure 3, FIT includes three key components: Multisystemic Therapy, dialectical behavior therapy, and Motivational Enhancement Therapy. The program also integrates coping strategies related to substance use and components of relapse prevention, as needed.

FIGURE 3. COMPONENTS OF FAMILY INTEGRATED TRANSITIONS (FIT)

- Multisystemic Therapy: MST provides 24/7 therapist support that includes cognitive behavior therapy, behavioral parent training, and functional family therapy to address multiple dimensions (i.e. family, school, community) that impact youth behavior.
- Dialectical Behavior Therapy: DBT includes skills training, individual psychotherapy, in-the-moment coaching, case management, and a consultation team.¹¹⁷
- Motivational Enhancement Therapy: MET “is a counseling approach that helps individuals resolve their ambivalence about engaging in treatment and stopping their drug use. This approach aims to evoke rapid and internally motivated change” (p.48).¹¹⁸



The focus on youth with mental health disorders and substance use disorders in FIT is particularly relevant, given that about 70% of students in juvenile justice schools have three or more mental health disorders, about half of students in juvenile justice have a conduct disorder,¹⁰⁴ and more than 45% of students in juvenile justice have a substance use problem.¹⁰⁵ There is a high rate of recidivism among youth with mental health disorders and the risk increases if youth have a comorbid substance use disorder.¹⁰⁶ However, FIT can only be considered promising at this time. While theoretically sound, the single recent study reported a 30% decrease in felony recidivism, but found no significant effect for overall, misdemeanor, or violent felony recidivism.¹⁰⁷ The intervention may have greater impact in future research studies if key limitations that were present within this study are addressed. Specifically, there is a need to account for variations in treatment adherence and dosage, and to consider measurement of all intervention components (i.e., component analysis).

Brief Strategic Family Therapy (BSFT)[®] is another promising approach to support formerly incarcerated youth. The 12-16 session intervention was designed by Dr. Jose Szapocznik for youth ages 6-17 that exhibit problems including substance abuse, conduct problems, and delinquency. BSFT[®] focuses on modifying family interactions that may inadvertently contribute to or allow for youth delinquent behavior.¹⁰⁸ As Szapocznik and colleagues have noted, three core principles underlie BSFT[®]. First, the family-systems approach considers that a youth's risky and delinquent behavior mirrors maladaptive family interactions. Second, family problems are related to "habitual and repetitive patterns of interaction" (p. 3) that perpetuate negative youth behavior.¹⁰⁹ Third, problem-focused interventions are designed to reduce targeted maladaptive interactions and promote more positive and productive interactions. As described in Figure 4, to address family issues, therapists employ three BSFT[®] approaches: joining, diagnosing, and restructuring.¹¹⁰

FIGURE 4. BRIEF STRATEGIC FAMILY THERAPY (BSFT)^{®120}

- "Joining occurs at two levels. At the individual level, the therapist establishes a relationship with each family member. At the family level, the therapist joins with the family system to create a new therapeutic system."
- "Diagnosis refers to observing how family members behave with one another, in order to identify interactional patterns that allow or encourage problematic youth behavior."
- Restructuring is accomplished via working in the present, using reframes (e.g., a therapist reframes a father's anger at his daughter's choices with statements of compassion and worry.¹²¹), assigning tasks and coaching family members to try new ways of relating to one another. Through these tasks, the BSFT[®] Program is designed to change family interactions that maintain the problems to more effective and adaptive interactions.



A few studies have focused on BSFT® since 2008. In one study where a modified version of BSFT was used with gang-affiliated Mexican American youth, the results showed limited impact of the intervention.¹¹¹ The researchers found some effect on adolescent alcohol use, but not on drug use, gang identification, or conflict resolution. In another study that included 480 families, BSFT® was compared to “treatment as usual” for a sample that involved 72% of youth that were referred from the juvenile justice system and 69% that had a substance use disorder.¹¹² Following the lengthy 8-month treatment, youth reported significantly fewer drug use days than those youth in the treatment as usual condition. While parents reported better family functioning with BSFT®, there was no significant difference for youth across conditions. A follow-up study conducted approximately five years beyond treatment revealed that BSFT® youth reported fewer arrests or incarcerations, and exhibited fewer externalizing behaviors.¹¹³ Results indicate that BSFT® holds promise for youth with juvenile justice involvement, but more longitudinal research is needed that documents the actual arrest and incarceration of youth following treatment.

MOVING FORWARD

When incarcerated youth exit a juvenile correctional facility, there is an urgent and profound necessity to provide for their multifaceted needs. Identification of needed youth and familial supports, a detailed transition plan linking the youth with specific services, and ensuring interagency communication and collaboration should, most appropriately, begin at intake, be continuously provided for during incarceration, and be maintained post-exit. This brief has focused on evidence-based and promising approaches to supporting post-exit youth with the realization that transition support and planning during incarceration varies widely. It is noteworthy that many interventions designed to prevent law violating behavior, and to divert youth from incarceration also have utility for reducing recidivism (see [*Making the Right Turn: A Research Update on Prevention and Diversion for Justice-Involved Youth*](#)).¹¹⁴ Moreover, much of the research on supporting youth transition to the community appropriately begins while the youth are incarcerated (see [*Making the Right Turn: A Research Update on Improving Transition Outcomes among Youth involved in the Juvenile Corrections System*](#)).¹¹⁵ As such, it is recommended that development and implementation of post-exit supports for youth take into consideration all three briefs in this series.¹¹⁶



RELATED LINKS

School-Based Preparatory Experiences

National Technical Assistance Center for the Education of Neglected or Delinquent Children and Youth:

<https://neglected-delinquent.ed.gov/topic-areas/teaching-and-learning>

NDTAC Issue Briefs provide information on a variety of areas related to the education of youth who are neglected, delinquent, or at risk.

Center for Juvenile Justice Reform:

http://cjjr.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/EducationalNeedsOfChildrenandYouth_May2010.pdf

Research Brief, *Addressing the Unmet Educational Needs of Children and Youth in the Juvenile Justice and Child Welfare Systems*

Career-Preparation and Work-Based Learning Experiences

My Next Move

<https://www.mynextmove.org/>

My Next Move is an online career exploration tool designed for easy use by students, youth, and others interested in finding out about different occupations, careers, and industries. It contains information on over 900 different careers.

Youth Development and Leadership Opportunities

Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Model Programs Guide:

<https://www.ojjdp.gov/mpg/>

OJJDP's Model Programs Guide (MPG) contains information about evidence-based juvenile justice and youth prevention, intervention, and reentry programs.

NDTAC Mentoring Toolkit:

https://neglected-delinquent.ed.gov/sites/default/files/docs/NDTAC_MentoringToolkit_Unabridged.pdf

The Mentoring Toolkit provides to support educators, treatment staff, reentry workers, and others involved in reentry planning.

National Mentoring Partnership:

<http://www.mentoring.org/program-resources/start-a-program/>

Technical assistance tools and resources for developing and implementing mentoring services across juvenile justice settings



Connecting Activities (support and community services)

Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Risk/Needs Assessments for Youth:

<https://www.ojjdp.gov/mpg/litreviews/RiskandNeeds.pdf>

This publication reviews the literature on risks/needs assessments for examining a youth's risk of re-offending and needs that could be address to prevent recidivism.

National Institute of Justice Rated Programs and Practices Incorporating Cognitive Behavioral Therapy:

<https://nij.gov/journals/277/pages/crimesolutions-cbt-list.aspx>

Presents lists of programs and practices rated by CrimeSolutions.gov that incorporate cognitive behavioral therapy

Family Involvement and Supports

The PACER Center:

<http://www.pacer.org/>

"The PACER Center's mission is to expand opportunities and enhance the quality of life of children and young adults with disabilities and provide family programs."

Brief Strategic Family Therapy:

<https://brief-strategic-family-therapy.com/>

"The mission at The Family Therapy Training Institute of Miami is to provide the best training and consultation to the behavioral and mental health practitioners in order to maximize the effectiveness of treatment provided to at-risk kids and their families."



Endnotes

¹ The Juvenile Justice Reform Act of 2018 places more emphasis on preventing youth incarceration through the provision of evidence-based and promising programs and also includes measures to increase safety and educational opportunities for those youth in facilities.

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