

Improving Educational and Vocational Outcomes for Youth Reentering Rural Communities

Introduction

Although the number of youth in out-of-home placements in the United States has been falling for decades, there are still nearly 40,000 youth living in residential placement facilities on any day (Hockenberry & Sladky, 2020). Most of these youth will return home. Their successful reentry depends on the presence of caring individuals, access to education and employment opportunities, access to physical and behavioral healthcare, and other supports and services. Young people who are returning to rural communities from out-of-home placements may face challenges to successful reentry, and rural reentry service providers may face challenges in meeting their needs. Despite these potential limitations, rural communities possess strengths that juvenile justice practitioners and service providers can leverage to support a successful reentry process for youth. Successful reentry requires planning that begins early in a youth's placement outside the juvenile justice system, partnerships with the young person and their family, and a focus on the strengths and opportunities provided by the community.

This brief describes the importance of focusing on education- and employment-related outcomes for youth reentering rural communities from out-of-home placements. Although there are several challenges common to rural contexts, juvenile justice facilities can improve education and employment outcomes for youth in rural communities by partnering with youth, families, businesses, and community organizations; leveraging these relationships to create opportunities for youth; and using technology where appropriate to bolster these efforts. This brief highlights examples from around the country demonstrating how many jurisdictions have implemented creative solutions to the collective challenges that State agencies and their rural community partners face regarding the educational and employment outcomes of youth reentering rural communities.

The Importance of Supporting the Education and Employment Outcomes of Youth Reentering Rural Communities

Education is a vital building block for youth that gives them a foundation upon which to build their lives and future careers. Educational attainment is correlated with labor market success, earning potential, and the ability to obtain a full-time job (Aliprantis & Zenker, 2011). Systems-involved youth, who often face barriers to educational attainment, also face obstacles to participating in

the labor market. In turn, barriers to reentering local schools and getting good jobs can serve as risk factors for recidivism (OJJDP, 2017).

Because education has such an impact on labor market potential, it is essential that systems-involved youth have access to quality education, which will in turn have a positive impact on their future employment and related outcomes. A 2015 national survey found that only eight State agencies provided educational and vocational services to youth in custody that were comparable to the services available to

these youth in their home communities (Council of State Governments Justice Center, 2015; OJJDP, 2019). Rural communities may face additional barriers to providing these services.

Juvenile justice practitioners need to collaborate with education and labor stakeholders on planning for reentry, leverage the strong relationships characteristic of rural communities, and use technology where appropriate to break down barriers to accessing needed services for youth who live in rural communities. Ultimately, education and employment opportunities should be a critical area of focus for providers beginning in pre-release, which will help youth living in rural areas achieve success upon reentry and beyond.

Potential Challenges Facing Youth from Rural Communities and Systems of Care in Reentry

Although strong cross-systems communication and collaboration between juvenile justice agencies, the court, education systems, community groups, and other stakeholders are essential for positive outcomes for youth returning to rural areas from detention, these partnerships can be particularly challenging for systems that serve rural communities (Gonsoulin & Read, 2011). This is due to factors such as:

- Barriers to accessing reentry services, including large geographic distances between facilities and youths' homes. In rural areas, the closest service providers could be hours away (Frey, 1999; Mertins, 2016).
- Logistical barriers, like a lack of funding for transportation (Mertins, 2016).

Barriers to information sharing, including limited available technology and larger distances between agencies serving youth involved in multiple systems of care.

In addition to these challenges, rural communities also confront issues common to all jurisdictions, including:

- Practitioners' implicit biases about certain populations (e.g., particular racial or ethnic groups, individuals experiencing poverty, or those with prior system involvement) can foment distrust between these groups and the systems that serve them; and
- A lack of clear cross-agency communication and role definitions, especially as they relate to youth involved in multiple systems, can lead to potential service gaps (Leone & Weinberg, 2012).

In rural communities, where access to specialized services is limited, unaddressed learning disabilities pose further barriers to successful reentry. Research has shown that about 33 percent of youth in long-term secure care facilities have learning disabilities, compared with 8 percent of youth in the general population (Cruise et al., 2011). A lack of access to special education services and vocational opportunities in juvenile justice facilities may exacerbate the barriers to reentry faced by youth with disabilities who are transitioning back to their rural home communities, where access to services and supports may already be scarce (Fitzgerald, 2020; Sedlak & McPherson, 2010). Reentry planning and services in secure care facilities must address youths' individualized educational and vocational needs. This is best achieved through strategic partnerships with youth, families, and relevant service providers.

Strategies for Improving Educational and Employment Outcomes for Youth Reentering Rural Communities

In this section, we describe four steps toward collaboration on reentry for youth in rural communities, provide an example of how working with community leaders enhanced employment opportunities for these youth, and note how technology may be used to bolster these efforts.

Collaborate on Reentry Planning and Service Delivery at Both the Systems Level and the Individual Level

Juvenile justice agencies must work closely with schools, community-based organizations, and providers who will support the educational and career needs of systems-involved youth from custody through reentry. Ideally, these community partnerships should be in place before a youth enters a facility. Based on a youth's individual needs, juvenile justice practitioners may need to establish additional community partnerships, including partnerships with mental or behavioral health providers, mentorship programs, and other organizations.

Harris (2006) offers a multipronged strategy to foster partnerships between community organizations (including businesses) and the juvenile justice system, addressing challenges like identifying necessary components for employment programs and measuring employment-related outcomes among youth. This framework is readily adaptable to the rural reentry context. The following action steps expand on Harris's strategy by considering systems' partnerships with youth and families and youth's educational outcomes. These steps include:

1. *Identify stakeholders and build sustainable partnerships.*

The first step in improving rural interagency communication and cooperation is identifying relevant stakeholders. The juvenile justice, child welfare, and education systems and the courts should be included, along with a variety of community organizations such as faith-based organizations, community centers, and mentorship programs. Engaging local community groups brings diverse perspectives and potential supports to collaborative reentry-planning efforts. Forging strong relationships with local business owners and school districts can connect youth with educational and vocational opportunities in their home communities before their release.

For youth who are placed in facilities outside of their home communities, it is important to identify the individuals who will serve as the youth's local supports upon their reentry to the community. Partnering with stakeholders and families while a youth is in an out-of-home placement shores up reliable supports for their transition back into their community and school.

2. *Establish an understanding of the group's overall goals and each participant's role in achieving them.*

Once reentry planning partnerships are established, the partnering organizations and individuals must come to a consensus on shared goals and the roles and responsibilities for each person. Whether establishing broad conditions for a system-level interagency partnership or defining the goals of a specific youth's reentry team, clearly defined roles and goals are essential to improving education and employment outcomes. Consider the following questions:

System level	Individual level
What specific issues do we want to target?	What has brought this youth into our care?
How will we engage youth and families across systems and organizations?	What is this youth's capacity for engagement? Are there additional opportunities for engagement that we can provide that would work better for them?
What does success look like for each individual youth we serve?	What will success look like for this youth once they leave placement?
What are the unique strengths, risks, and needs of each youth and family we serve, and what can we do to amplify their strengths, respond to their needs, and remediate risk factors?	What strengths, risks, and needs do this youth and their family exhibit, and what can we do to amplify their strengths, respond to their needs, and remediate risk factors?
How will we broaden our coalition to include a more diverse group of stakeholders?	Are there potential supports or services that would be beneficial for this youth or family that we cannot provide at this time? If so, what partnerships would we need to cultivate to provide these supports or services?

3. Create an action plan with measurable outcomes.

Partnering organizations should create an action plan focused on the outcomes they seek for the general youth population they serve as well as for each individual youth in the case-planning process. What specific issue(s) is your group targeting, how will you go about it, and how will you measure success? Some questions to consider include:

System level	Individual level
What are the strengths of our community, and how can we leverage those strengths to improve outcomes for youth reentering their communities?	What are this youth's strengths, and how can we leverage those strengths to create an individualized plan for them to achieve their goals?

System level	Individual level
Do the available data we have hint at where we should focus our efforts?	What do we know about this youth that should inform the services and supports we offer them? Have we asked the youth and their family about this, or is our thinking based on our own assumptions?
How will we gather data to measure if our chosen initiative is effective?	What will success look like for this specific youth?
How will we engage line staff, youth, and families to ensure their feedback is incorporated into our efforts?	How will we partner with youth, families, and staff to ensure this youth achieves the youth's personal definition of success?

All partners, including youth and families, should be involved in creating this action plan in both individual and system-level contexts. More detailed information about how to effectively involve families in the reentry planning process can be found in the Family Engagement Rural Reentry Brief in this series.

4. Measure outcomes of collaboration.

Both quantitative and qualitative measures should be used to determine whether collaboration efforts are achieving the targeted outcomes and that systems-involved youth and their families believe these efforts were beneficial. The data resulting from these measurements should inform future work related to education and employment for youth reentering their rural communities. Questions to consider include:

System level	Individual level
How many youth currently receive educational and vocational opportunities while in placement? How can we increase the number of youth receiving these opportunities?	Did we offer this youth an employment opportunity that they were interested in? How did they respond to this opportunity?

System level	Individual level
What are the current mean grade point averages of youth in placement, and what can we do to help students achieve higher GPAs?	How did we define success for this youth in terms of education when they arrived at our facility, and did they achieve this success? If not, what barriers prevented them from doing so?
How might changes to educational and vocational services during confinement affect youth recidivism rates?	Has this youth reoffended after taking part in our programming? If so, for what?

Youths’ educational and employment-related achievements should also be measured in this step to gauge the success of agencies’ collaboration efforts. Examples of applicable considerations on an individual level include, but should not be limited to:

Educational achievements	Employment-related achievements
Did the youth graduate from high school while in placement or after reentering their community?	Did the youth participate in a vocational program while in placement?
Did the youth complete a GED or Hi-Step program while in placement or after reentering their community?	Did the youth think that the vocational programming they received was meaningful?
How many graduating credits did the youth earn while in placement?	Does the youth plan to eventually pursue a career in the field they trained in during their placement or in a related field?
Was the youth made aware of potential career paths that could follow their completion of high school (college, technical school, etc.)?	Did the youth earn any certifications that could lead to employment following reentry into their community?

A robust continuum of educational and vocational offerings during placement helps improve youths’ chances of success when they reenter their rural communities. Although it is important for systems to have a shared, overarching vision, it is just as important to make sure that a one-size-fits-all approach to

education and employment outcomes is not the standard. This allows systems to devise improvement plans regarding education and employment outcomes while also recognizing that each youth in their care has unique strengths, risks, and needs. The following example illustrates how the State of Nebraska individualizes transition planning for youth.

Prioritizing Transition Planning: Nebraska Department of Correctional Services

The State of Nebraska employs transition coordinators to work with youth, families, and vocational services providers to develop individualized reentry plans for youth in custody. There are three types of transition coordinators. A coordinator from the Department of Education works with systems that serve any youth placed out of their home school. A Reentry Supervisor, through the Probation Administration, works with youth while they are in a correctional facility and when they reenter their community. Finally, a coordinator from the Department of Corrections helps youth reintegrate into their home communities and assists with career pathways collaboration. The State funds these positions through a combination of State and Federal funding awarded to areas with high percentages of children from low-income families. Nebraska also mandates reentry planning (with State statutes LB464 and LB561) (Blueprint for Change, n.d.).

Leverage Relationships With the Community To Create Employment Opportunities

Relationships forged with community leaders, businesses, and other organizations during placement are a vital source of educational and

vocational programming and assistance for youth upon reentry. For example, the State of Utah has successfully leveraged its relationships with rural business leaders. Specifically, Utah created a new position within the Division of Juvenile Justice Services to foster and maintain these relationships and unlock new opportunities for systems-involved youth across multiple sectors.

Youth who are placed in facilities far away from their homes still benefit from relevant work experience during placement. Although they may not maintain these employment relationships after returning home, their work experience gives them transferrable skills, positions them for future success, and enables them to contribute to their rural communities. For example, a youth may not live near an automotive manufacturing facility, but if the juvenile facility has a partnership with such a facility, the youth can learn valuable automotive manufacturing skills in placement that are transferrable to their home community after their release. Continuity in education during placement is another essential building block for success, giving youth a foundation upon which they can build vocational skills.

Use Technology To Support Educational and Employment Services and Reentry Planning

Rural communities face unique barriers to education, including difficulty hiring and retaining teachers, a lack of public transportation, and a lack of funding (Tieken, 2020). These issues are amplified for rural juvenile facilities, which face obstacles in (1) hiring highly qualified teachers that live near the facilities, (2) offering professional development opportunities to teachers, and (3) a lack of specific concentration tracks in juvenile justice correctional education. Collectively, these challenges compound gaps

in educational services for youth in rural placements who may already face educational hardships in their home communities, especially if they are from a rural area. Technology offers a possible solution to some of these issues.

Leveraging Community Relationships: Utah Department of Human Services' Division of Juvenile Justice Services

The Utah Department of Human Services' Division of Juvenile Justice Services (JJS) fosters relationships and connections in rural areas of the State to increase stability for youth reentering their communities, with an emphasis on improving vocational learning opportunities for youth in placement. Utah's approach was informed by an analysis of recidivism data, which showed an increase in stabilization and a decrease in recidivism among youth who were focused on education, living conditions, mental health, employment, and other reentry outcomes. JJS's initial efforts relied on a volunteer network that proved difficult to sustain. In response, JJS created a dedicated employment coordinator position in 2020 to spearhead the effort. The employment coordinator has successfully leveraged relationships with employers to create employment opportunities that connect youth with essential career skills. Effective communication was an essential element of building vocational partnerships with community and technical schools and cultivating relationships with community employers over time. Utah's efforts, which were supported by the State and a variety of grants including Second Chance Act grants, have reduced the number of youth coming through Utah's juvenile justice system.

During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, technology gave youth access to self-paced educational resources and larger numbers of qualified teachers. Technology can also expand youths' access to employment and vocational training opportunities while in placement. Through the use of technology, youth placed in facilities outside of their communities have an opportunity to learn from individuals they otherwise would not have encountered. Technology can further connect youth in placement with professionals in their fields of interest who live far from the juvenile facility but who can share their expertise in a virtual format. As youth gain new skills, they can demonstrate these skills to potential employers during web-based job interviews for employment after their release. The example below details how a Kentucky facility has used technology to bolster educational opportunities.

Juvenile justice facilities are uniquely positioned to provide youth with technology-facilitated opportunities that are not available in their rural home communities. Juvenile justice facilities should provide these unique educational and vocational opportunities for youth whenever possible so that youth reenter their communities with the knowledge and skills they need to be successful.

Conclusion

Education and employment are inextricably linked, and educational attainment directly correlates with positive employment outcomes. To improve educational and employment outcomes for systems-involved youth returning to rural communities, it is imperative that providers and stakeholders collaborate effectively with each other, and with youth and families, to provide necessary planning, programs, supports, and services.

Use of Technology in Facilities: Kentucky's Adair Youth Development Center

The Adair Youth Development Center (AYDC) in Kentucky has increased its use of technology in recent years. Recognizing that students in correctional facilities need the opportunity to become digital citizens, AYDC strives to promote digital literacy for youth through its use of technology. AYDC implemented a number of safety and compliance measures to ensure that youth use the internet responsibly, including web blockers for certain websites, 24-hour camera recording in proximity of computers in classrooms, random computer checks, a daily email log of internet traffic, and a responsible use form that students must sign. Violations of this policy are assessed on a case-by-case basis with individualized consequences. Positive outcomes include youth applying for employment, creating résumés, and researching continuing education and certification opportunities (Kuster & Irvin, 2018).

Frequent and clear communication between partners is essential for both broad systemic change and individual reentry planning for youth in rural communities. In both contexts, juvenile justice professionals should take the lead in cultivating sustainable partnerships with youth, families, schools, community groups, businesses, and other stakeholders in rural communities that will improve outcomes for youth. Once these partnerships are established, juvenile justice system professionals can leverage them to generate new educational and vocational opportunities for youth in custody from rural communities. Technology can help connect youth in rural facilities with key professionals who would

otherwise be inaccessible. Through these various strategies, juvenile facilities can enhance educational and vocational

programming within their agencies and bolster education- and employment-related outcomes for youth reentering rural communities.

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