Reintegration With Resilience: Supporting Mental and Behavioral Health for Youth Leaving Confinement

For youth and young adults leaving juvenile detention centers and other secure settings, the journey toward reintegration is a complex one. Among the many steps, addressing mental and behavioral health needs is critical to their success. Studies show that 40–90% of youth who are incarcerated have at least one diagnosable mental health disorder, with conduct disorder, substance use disorders, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) being the most common.[i] Many of these young people have histories of trauma and adverse childhood experiences, social and economic disadvantages, and systemic failures that contribute to their mental health struggles.[ii] Moreover, secure care settings can worsen mental health conditions through isolation, trauma, and a lack of treatment access, further disrupting healthy development and increasing the risk of recidivism.[iii, iv]

Reentry programs play a vital role in supporting young people on their reintegration journey, and prioritizing mental and behavioral health is key. This resource discusses why addressing these needs is so critical and how reentry programs can best support young people in meeting their needs. The document also provides some practical tools to support this work.

Building Comprehensive Knowledge

Reentry program staff should be equipped with a thorough understanding of the prevalence of mental and behavioral health concerns among youth in preparing comprehensive transition plans for young people returning from secure care. This knowledge should encompass the **specific conditions commonly faced**, such as depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).[v] Additionally, familiarity with the **signs and symptoms** of these conditions allows for earlier identification and intervention. Recognizing the **potential impact of these conditions** on reintegration success, including increased risk of recidivism, allows programs to prioritize mental and behavioral health support. Additionally, fostering a **trauma-informed approach** through understanding the potential impact of past traumas on current behavior and well-being is essential for shaping program interactions and fostering a supportive environment.[vi]

Taking Actionable Steps

To identify, understand, and help address young people's mental and behavioral health needs, reentry programs can implement various strategies. **Initial screenings and assessments** are crucial for identifying potential mental and behavioral health needs and tailoring support accordingly. Building or relying on existing partnerships with community mental and behavioral health providers can then facilitate **referral and connection** to ongoing treatment services, ensuring connected and comprehensive support. Ensuring **safe spaces** for young people as they navigate and receive support for mental and behavioral wellness is also vital. Reentry programs can facilitate such environments through

peer support groups or by offering access to **individual counseling sessions**. These spaces provide a platform for youth to share their experiences, receive support from their peers, and work through challenges. Additionally, integrating **life skills training** into the reentry program equips young people with essential tools to manage stress. These skills, including developing healthy coping mechanisms and making positive choices, contribute to their emotional well-being and long-term success.

It is important for reentry programs to remember that mental and behavioral health needs are intricately linked to other aspects of reentry and reintegration, such as pursuing education, securing and maintaining gainful employment, finding safe, stable housing, and maintaining supportive family relationships. By **adopting a holistic approach** that addresses these various needs in a **comprehensive and coordinated manner**, reentry programs can empower young people with the tools and support they need to overcome challenges, improve their overall well-being, and successfully reintegrate into society.

Addressing Challenges and Overcoming Barriers

Despite the available resources and pre-release and post-release reentry program efforts, addressing mental and behavioral health needs for youth leaving secure care is not without its challenges. Several significant barriers hinder young people's access to appropriate care:

Stigma: The stigma associated with mental or behavioral health conditions can prevent individuals from seeking help due to fear of judgment or discrimination.

Lack of access: A shortage of mental and behavioral health professionals, especially in underserved communities, can limit access to treatment options.

Affordability: The cost of mental and behavioral health services can be a significant barrier, especially for individuals with limited financial resources.

Logistical challenges: Transportation difficulties, childcare concerns, and inconvenient appointment times can also make it difficult for individuals to consistently access treatment services and supports.

Lack of continuity of care: Transitioning between different facilities and programs can disrupt ongoing treatment and create gaps in care.

Recognizing these barriers is crucial in providing effective support. By implementing evidence-based practices, fostering collaboration between different systems, and advocating for policy changes that address systemic barriers, reentry programs can create more supportive environments for young people leaving secure care. In particular, **building and maintaining strong partnerships with community mental and behavioral health providers** is essential for successful reentry programs. These partnerships facilitate smooth transitions from incarceration-based services into ongoing care within a young person's community. This continuity of treatment increases the likelihood of positive long-term outcomes.

While reentry programs are vital for supporting youth as they leave detention or incarceration, it is equally important to **push for reform within the juvenile justice system itself**. By advocating for policies that prioritize trauma-informed therapeutic approaches, comprehensive mental and behavioral health screening and treatment, and community-based alternatives to detention, reentry programs can support efforts to avoid the trauma and other harmful impacts that

detention and incarceration can inflict on young people. This advocacy is a crucial element in preventing the very issues that reentry programs work so hard to address.

Resources to Support This Work

[Systems-Involved Youth: Rural Reentry With a Focus on Health and Well-Being](#)
Corrections and Community Engagement Technical Assistance Center (2002)

This brief focuses on access to services that can improve the health and well-being of youth who are or have been involved in the juvenile justice system, including those who are dually involved with the child welfare system. The brief provides an overview of what health and well-being entail, particularly for systems-involved youth, and discusses the challenges that youth living in rural areas face in accessing providers or specialized care; describes systems integration and a more streamlined, holistic view of health; and provides a broad definition of health and well-being that includes physically and intellectually stimulating activities.

[Trauma-Informed Practices for Reentry Providers](#)
Corrections and Community Engagement Technical Assistance Center (2002)

This brief provides an overview of the prevalence and impact of trauma on individuals involved in the justice system prior to and because of their involvement in the justice system. The brief spotlights the high rates of exposure to trauma in the lives of most youth and young adults involved in the justice system, and the impact of traumatic experiences on well-being as these individuals attempt to cope and thrive. The brief also highlights strategies for implementing a trauma-informed approach across various justice entities, including community-based and secure care settings.

[How to Use an Integrated Approach to Address the Mental Health Needs of Youth in the Justice System](#)
The Council of State Governments Justice Center (2022)

Over 65 percent of youth arrested every year have mental health conditions, which amounts to over two-thirds of boys and three-quarters of girls. Often, these needs have gone untreated or misdiagnosed, leading to engagement in the juvenile justice system. This brief identifies the collaborative role that juvenile justice stakeholders can play in helping to prevent and/or reduce involvement in the justice system by addressing youth's mental health needs.

Endnotes

[i] Heller, P., Morosan, L., Badoud, D., Laubscher, M., Jimenez Olariaga, L., Debbané, M., Wolff, H., & Baggio, S. (2021). Prevalence rates and evolution of psychiatric disorders among incarcerated youths in comparison with non-incarcerated youths. *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, *12*, 784954. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8782264/

[ii] Teplin, L., McClelland, G. M., & Messinger, P. (2013). Comorbidity of mental disorders in justice-involved youth: Prevalence and implications for treatment. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, *52*(10), 1018–1027. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8782264/

[iii] Underwood, L. A., & Washington, A. (2016). Mental illness and juvenile offenders. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, *13*(2), 228. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4772248/

[iv] Mendel, R. (2023). *Why youth incarceration fails: An updated review of the evidence.* The Sentencing Project. https://www.sentencingproject.org/reports/why-youth-incarceration-fails-an-updated-review-of-the-evidence/

[v] Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. (2017). *Intersection between mental health and the juvenile justice system*. https://ojjdp.ojp.gov/model-programs-guide/literature-reviews/intsection_between_mental_health_and_the_juvenile_justice_system.pdf

[vi] Branson, C. E., Baetz, C. L., Horwitz, S. M., & Hoagwood, K. E. (2017). Trauma-informed juvenile justice systems: A systematic review of definitions and core components. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice and Policy*, *9*(6), 635–646. https://doi.org/10.1037/tra0000255

YRTAC | Youth Reentry Technical Assistance Center

OJJDP | Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention