



# DATA TRENDS: March, 2003 #70

Summaries of research on mental health services for children and adolescents and their families



## From Incarceration to Community: Challenges & Factors Associated with Success in Transition

Source: Bullis, M., Yovanoff, P., Mueller, G., & Havel, E. (2002). Life on the "outs": Examination of the facility-to-community transition of incarcerated youth. *Exceptional Children*, 69(1), 7 – 22.

Continuing a theme of several recent Data Trends on issues related to children's mental health and juvenile justice (see for example Data Trends #68, #66, #55, and #54), we report on an article researching the transition for juvenile offenders from incarceration to community. Several statistics from the article highlight the importance of this topic. For instance, over 100,000 youth are incarcerated each year in the U.S., about half of whom will return to the juvenile correction system. In addition, a large percentage of incarcerated youth have special education needs and/or have not completed high school or obtained an equivalency degree and have difficulty obtaining employment. Given these data, it is clear that the success of transition from incarceration to community is important both for the health and well-being of the youth themselves, as well as for the communities to which they return.

The authors report on 12-month post incarceration experiences of youth in the TRACS (Transition Research on Adjudicated Youth in Community Settings) research project, a four year study focused on the transition of youth from detention by the Oregon Youth Authority (OYA) to the community. Youth at several sites were recruited and pre-release data (i.e., demographic and referral information and youth interviews) were gathered for 531 individuals who were later administered follow-up interviews at 6- and 12-months after release. These youth were primarily male (84%) and white (80%), with a special education disability (58%). Approximately 53% were older than 16.

The authors sought to identify how the TRACS sample fared in the community after release from OYA and to determine variables associated with transition success. Variables selected for examination included employment (rate and type of job), education (enrollment status and type of setting), independent living status (supported or unsupported), happiness (measured on a 4-point scale), and engagement. Engagement was an overall index of community adjustment, defined in this study as living in the community and being employed or enrolled in school full-time or working part-time and going to school part-time.

Results revealed engagement rates of 46.7% at 6-months and 31% at 12-months. Logistic regression predicting return to OYA at 6-months supported the overall model with the variables listed above. However, special education status was the only individual variable that predicted return, with participants who had a disability being 2.8 times more likely to return to OYA than those without a disability. Similar regression at 12-months did not support the overall model, but revealed that females were significantly more likely to return to OYA than males and that those who were engaged at the 6-month follow up (i.e., living in the community and working/attending school), were significantly *less* likely to return to OYA at 12-months. A significant interaction between disability status and engagement was also found, such that those participants who had a disability *but were also engaged* were less likely to return to OYA than those with a disability who were not engaged.

An additional set of logistic regression analyses were run at 6- and 12-months to determine variables associated with engagement at each time frame. The models accounted for a significant amount of the variance in engagement levels at both time periods, with several individual variables significantly contributing to the model. At 6-month interview, females were significantly *less* likely to be engaged than males. At 12-month interview, participants with a disability were significantly *less* likely to be engaged. Participants who were engaged at 6-months were significantly more likely to be engaged at 12-months.

Together, results provide sobering data on the rate at which detained youth successfully made the transition to communities, with nearly a quarter of youth returning to OYA by 12-months after release. In addition, less than half the sample was engaged at 6- and 12-month follow-ups, indicating that most youth were not fully working and/or attending school after release. As the authors note, it "is clear that incarcerating the individuals in this study did not

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Prepared by the Research and Training Center on Family Support and Children's Mental Health, Portland State University, 1912 SW 6<sup>th</sup>, Rm. 120, Portland, OR 97201, (503) 725-4040 in collaboration with the Research and Training Center for Children's Mental Health, University of South Florida. Contact [datatrends@pdx.edu](mailto:datatrends@pdx.edu), or [www rtc.pdx.edu](http://www rtc.pdx.edu).

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transform many into successful young adults” (p. 19). On a more positive note, those individuals who were engaged at 6-months were generally engaged at 12-months and engagement was associated with remaining in the community. This finding suggests the importance and potential long-term benefit of services targeted at increasing engagement immediately upon release from incarceration. Of particular concern are youth with special education disabilities, who were more likely to return to OYA and somewhat less likely to be engaged than non-disabled youth. Fortunately however, those youth with disabilities who were engaged were less likely to return to the juvenile justice system and more likely to be engaged at 12-months, suggesting the importance of specialized services to youth in this group in order to promote engagement in the community. Although males were more likely to return to OYA, females were less likely to be engaged at 6-month follow-up, indicating a potential differential in the service needs of males and females after incarceration. Despite limitations imposed by the naturalistic sample of individuals in a single state, results offer preliminary support for the idea that youth exiting incarceration settings need services both to prevent recidivism and to promote engagement.

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