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Weaving Young Ex-Offenders Back into the Fabric of Society

Christopher Uggen, Sara Wakefield, Jeremy Travis, and Christy Visher

More than 100,000 young adults aged 18–24 leave a federal or state prison each year. As the Network on Transitions to Adulthood has documented, becoming an adult in today’s world is an exciting time for many, yet it can also be a difficult road in today’s changing labor market and shifting social and cultural landscape. Sometimes even the most well-equipped young adults struggle. Add a criminal past and the struggles only multiply.¹

In their forthcoming edited volume, *On Your Own without a Net: The Transition to Adulthood for Vulnerable Populations* (University of Chicago Press, fall 2005), Network members D. Wayne Osgood, E. Michael Foster, Constance Flanagan, and Gretchen Ruth track the transition to adulthood for those who face additional barriers in embracing adulthood. This policy brief summarizes two chapters in the volume, by Christopher Uggen and Sara Wakefield, and Jeremy Travis and Christy Visher, that address the challenges of integrating young offenders back into society. The authors argue that if we are to reintegrate these troubled young people into society as working, contributing adults, we must provide them the supports to find a job, build a family, and participate fully in civic society.

Profile of Young Adults Leaving Prison

The social and economic divide between the correctional and the general population is evident when people enter the system, and it is even more pronounced when they leave. Using national survey data and interviews with young inmates in Minnesota prisons, Uggen and Wakefield find that, among inmates under age 25 (their target population), one-fourth had spent some time in their childhood living in public housing, and nearly half (46.5%) said their parents or guardians had received public assistance. About 16% had been in foster care or institutional homes, and one-third reported that their parent or guardian had abused alcohol or drugs. The youth themselves also often had a drug or alcohol history. In addition, nearly one-third (31%) reported that a parent had spent time in prison or jail.

Further, only one in five male inmates aged 18–24 held a high school degree compared with 75% of the general population in that age group. At the time of their arrest, they were also more likely to have been unemployed. About 20% reported a disability, either physical or psychological. Among the prison population in 1997, 80% reported a history of substance abuse, and more than half reported that they were using drugs or alcohol at the time of their arrest.

Programs and Policies to Support Young Adults Leaving Prison

Given these significant barriers to the institutions that define adulthood—higher education, work, and marriage—it is perhaps not surprising that recidivism rates are as high as they are. However, despite public sentiment that “nothing works,” several studies, Uggen and Wakefield report, are beginning to show that rehabilitation can work

¹ The Network is supported by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. For more information on the Network, see www.pop.upenn.edu/transad.

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for those who participate.² Unfortunately, as Travis and Visher note, only about 10% of all inmates participate in education, vocational, or treatment programs on a given day.

In-Prison Programs: Preparing for Jobs

One element of successful programs is the ability to reshape inmates' perceptions of themselves. However, as the authors argue, to adopt a view of oneself as a computer programmer over a gang member, for example, one must believe that options exist outside the prison walls. A key option is a job, yet the formerly incarcerated often face enormous barriers to employment. As Travis and Visher report, job applicants with criminal records were offered half as many jobs as those with no record; African American applicants with criminal records received two-thirds fewer job offers. The "wage penalty" of imprisonment is estimated to be between 10% and 30%. As Karen, an inmate in her 30s, told Uggen and Wakefield:

What is the fourth question of every job interview? "Have you ever been convicted of a crime?" They ask you that before they ask for your prior work history or education...so they read "felon" before they ever read anything else.

In addition to the stigma of a record, many inmates, especially younger inmates, lack job skills, education, and connections to the job world. Programs to reconnect these youth are critical, and those that are most successful focus on skills that are applicable to the job market, ensure that program participation is timed to be near the inmate's release date, are sustained for at least several months, and provide continuity between the prison programs and community-based services.

A cost-benefit analysis, Travis and Visher report, shows that the most beneficial programs, in terms of reduced recidivism and future savings from reduced crime, were in-prison vocational programs, which yielded savings of \$2,835 per offender, followed closely by adult basic education (\$1,852). Work release programs and job counseling were still cost-effective, but the savings were significantly less.³

For younger inmates, however, providing work skills alone may prove insufficient. Few transitional programs have been found effective with this age group. Instead, Travis and Visher suggest, adding education, mentoring, apprenticeship, and positive peer group associations to training might better counter the attractions of antisocial lifestyles and promote a more positive attitude toward work.

Post-Release Programs

Currently, however, prerelease programs are few, and many prisoners are released only with \$50, a set of clothes, and a bus ticket. A 1997 survey of prerelease programs showed that only 13% of inmates due to be released in a year were participating in such a program.⁴ Equally sparse are transitional or postrelease programs. Among those that do exist, lack of coordination among the programs and between the program and correctional facilities limit their reach and effectiveness. Further, the caseloads of parole officers, traditionally the job and service link for the formerly incarcerated, have grown dramatically, limiting their ability to help.

Research has shown that strong family attachments during prison and after release can significantly improve outcomes. However, family relationships are often weakened by long prison sentences and infrequent communication, and few programs exist to support and build contact. As with employment programs, few programs continue to serve families after prison release.

² For a review, see F. Cullen and P. Gendreau, "Assessing Correctional Policy," *Criminal Justice*, vol. 3 (2000), pp. 109-75.

³ S. Aos et al., *The Comparative Costs and Benefits of Programs to Reduce Crime*. Olympia, WA: Washington State Institute for Public Policy.

⁴ J. Lynch and W. Sabol, *Prisoner Reentry in Perspective*. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute/Justice Policy Center, 2001.

The Research Network on Transitions to Adulthood and Public Policy examines the changing nature of early adulthood, and the policies, programs, and institutions that support young people as they move into adulthood. Significant cultural, economic, and demographic changes have occurred in the span of a few generations, and these changes are challenging youth's psychological and social development. Some are adapting well, but many others are floundering as they prepare to leave home, finish school, find jobs, and start families. The network is both documenting these cultural and social shifts, and exploring how families, government, and social institutions are shaping the course of young adults' development. The Network is funded by the MacArthur Foundation and chaired by University of Pennsylvania sociologist Frank Furstenberg.

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Civic life may also prove important to a more productive future. Loss of voting rights and restrictions on community life, argue Uggen and Wakefield, often compound labor market and other disadvantages, and serve to reinforce ex-offenders' social isolation. Nearly 4.7 million felons and ex-felons are legally disenfranchised in the United States. As Paul, a male in his 30s, told the authors:

Giving back voting rights is another way to make a person feel part of that community.
How can you feel that you're giving back to a community that you're a part of when you're exiled from it by not being able to vote and have a voice in it?

Not only voting and community participation are hampered. During the 1980s and 1990s, as Travis and Visher report, Congress passed legislation making felons ineligible for public housing, education loans, welfare benefits, and, in some cases, it revoked drivers' licenses, limiting the mobility necessary to access jobs. Local governments can also shift felons to the bottom of a waiting list for drug treatment if they have been treated in prison.

Wiser Public Investment

Young adults often lack well-established ties to conventional roles and activities prior to incarceration, and prison sets them back even farther. A wise public investment, the authors argue, would be policies that help these young men and women become taxpayers, contribute to their families, and gain economic stability. Yet, the "tough on crime" approach has made such efforts difficult. The magnitude of the problem, however, speaks to the urgency of reforming current policy and practices. Today, more than 13 million Americans have felony convictions. An African American man now faces a 28% chance that he will spend at least one year in prison at some point in his life.

An integrated service network that begins in prison, fosters strong family support, provides offenders with skills and a sense of hope and purpose, and gives them the tools and community supports to act on that vision would go far in helping this group of young adults, with their lives ahead of them, be woven back into the fabric of society.

Based on Christopher Uggen and Sara Wakefield, "Young Adults Reentering the Community from the Criminal Justice System: The Challenge of Becoming an Adult" (chapter 5), and Jeremy Travis and Christy Visher, "Prisoner Reentry and the Pathways to Adulthood: Policy Perspectives" (chapter 6). In On Your Own without a Net: The Transitions to Adulthood for Vulnerable Populations, edited by D. Wayne Osgood, E. Michael Foster, Constance Flanagan, and Gretchen Ruth. University of Chicago Press, forthcoming fall 2005.

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