

Research Brief: Perceptions of Educational Reentry Preparedness among Detained and Committed Youth

Prepared for PbS Learning Institute, Inc.

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Introduction

Successful community reentry for youth leaving the juvenile justice system can be an integral part of their path to desistance from delinquency. However, there is little available evidence demonstrating which reentry services are effective and which are not. In 2015, recognizing this need for evidence-based reentry measures, Performance-based Standards Learning Institute (PbS) partnered with the Council of Juvenile Correctional Administrators (CJCA) and the Vera Institute of Justice to develop reentry standards to measure and monitor the effectiveness of juvenile justice reentry services and practices. The project resulted in a framework of 33 standards and measures to assess youths' preparedness and readiness when they leave residential placement and when their post-placement supervision and/or system involvement ends. Reentry domains key to preventing reoffending and achieving positive youth outcomes included education and employment, well-being and health, and connection to the community. Additionally, four domains for best reentry practices were identified and included assessment, reentry planning, case management, and continuous quality improvement (Godfrey, 2019a).

Many of these measures can be collected from administrative records. However, PbS has recognized that administrative data alone provides an incomplete account of youth outcomes. Therefore, it is important to supplement administrative data with information directly from youth. To do so, PbS developed a new PbS Youth Reentry Survey to better understand how prepared and ready youths are when they leave juvenile justice facilities and end community supervision. Specifically, the survey asks youth for their perceptions of preparedness and readiness for reentry (Godfrey, 2019b). PbS began administering the Youth Reentry Survey in October 2019 and collects the surveys biannually in October and April. To date, surveys have been administered over 6 collection periods from October 2019 to April 2022.

Project Overview

We evaluated educational reentry preparedness among youth being released from a residential program or facility using PbS youth reentry survey data from 6 time points between October 2019 to April 2022. We found that youth who reported they received educational assistance while in a residential facility and had positive behavioral outlooks on their goals were more likely to report being prepared for educational reentry. Additionally, youth who reported that they expected to receive continuing care post-release and had structural supports (i.e., transportation, childcare, financial stability) were more likely to report being prepared. We argue that facility and reentry programming that emphasizes continuity of education, increases positive behavioral outlooks, and provides support post-release are likely useful tools to improve educational reentry preparedness among detained and committed youth.

Background

There are approximately 37,000 youth confined in juvenile justice residential detention and commitment programs in the United States (Hockenberry & Sladky, 2020). This population of youth often lack prosocial support systems, come from low-income communities, struggle with mental illnesses or substance abuse, and have histories of low academic achievement and engagement with school, which make their transition from facilities and reintegration to the

community–back to school in particular–difficult (Hsia, Bridges, & McHale, 2004; Garfinkel & Nelson, 2004; Steele, Bozick, & Davis, 2016). Further, institutional deficiencies often found in juvenile justice schools increase youths’ risk of academic failure and recidivism (Council of State Governments Justice Center, 2015; Macomber et al., 2010; Miller, 2019; Pesta & Blomberg, 2016; Rothman, 2002; Tannis, 2017).

However, despite numerous institutional and individual barriers, educational achievement during residential commitment or detention can be a critical element in delinquency prevention and pathways to desistance. Specifically, youth who receive a high-quality education and experience academic gains while in residential detention and/or commitment programs have improved post-release outcomes. Namely, youth who make academic gains have a lower likelihood of recidivism, higher likelihood of returning to school, improved likelihood of employment, and are more likely to exhibit positive behavioral outcomes (Blomberg, Bales, Mann, Piquero, & Berk, 2011; Blomberg, Bales, & Piquero, 2012; Elliott, 1994; Foley, 2001; Clark et al., 2011; Jaggi et al., 2020; Jenson & Howard, 1998; Unruh et al., 2009; Cavendish, 2014).

Despite making academic gains while in residential detention and commitment, research has shown that youth struggle to reenroll and stay in school post-release and are at an increased risk of school failure and dropping out (JJEP, 2006; MacArthur Foundation, 2005; Wald & Losen, 2003). Bullis, Yorano, Mueller, and Havel (2002) conducted a five-year longitudinal study of committed juvenile delinquents in Oregon and found that while youth who were participating in school after their release were less likely to recidivate, less than one half of the youth were working or in school six months after release. The proportion dropped to less than one third at 12-months post-release.

Research on community reintegration and school reentry has identified numerous difficulties and barriers that prevent youth from successfully transitioning back to school after their release from a juvenile justice facility. Some barriers include lack of family, school, and social supports, lack of academic skills and being far behind in school, negative peer associations, substance use, a lack of consistency across varying school systems (e.g., credits earned, calendars), and even direct school resistance, exclusion, and stigma (Baltodano, Platt, & Roberts, 2005; Feierman, Levick, & Mody, 2010; Garwood, 2015; Mathur & Clark, 2014; Miller, Therrien, & Romig, 2019; Unruh, 2005; Unruh & Bullis, 2005; Wallace, 2012). Students may also lack the appropriate required records and documents needed for reenrollment (e.g., birth certificate, residency verification, immunization records), which in some instances are not forwarded to community schools from the juvenile justice system (Feierman et al., 2010; Wallace, 2012).

Although research exploring barriers to post-release school reenrollment has been growing, youths’ perceptions of the barriers that they believe to be standing in their way of successful reentry remains largely unknown, with only a few studies that have sought to explore self-reported barriers (Garwood, 2015; Mathur & Clark, 2014; Mathur, Clark, Hartzell, LaCroix, & McTier, 2019). Through interviews with formerly incarcerated young adults and incarcerated youth with special needs, the most common reported barriers to successful reentry included the lack of a support system, history of poor school attendance and low academic performance, and returning to the same environment and patterns that preceded their incarceration. The current

study addresses this gap in the literature by examining self-reported barriers and facilitators to educational reentry preparedness among youth incarcerated in facilities across the United States.

Present Study

We investigated youth preparedness for educational reentry upon release from residential commitment programs or facilities. Our primary research question assessed whether youth feel prepared to return to school upon release. Specifically, we measured whether youth had a plan for their long-term education that is helpful. Our secondary research question examined the factors that contributed to youths' perception of being prepared for educational reentry. Specifically, we examined factors that increased or decreased youth preparedness for reentry.

Methods

Data

Data for the study come from PbS' Youth Reentry Survey (YRS). The YRS is administered to youth shortly before they leave secure placement or when they end post-placement supervision. The survey asks youth about their perceptions of their preparedness and readiness to return to the community and live independently. Specifically, the survey asks youth questions about their perceptions of fairness and safety, the skills they have learned, their relationships with their families and case manager, their sense of connection to community, and questions about their confidence, hope, resiliency, willingness to show up, and whether or not they feel prepared to take action (PbS Learning Institute, 2022).

Sample

The present study used youth reentry survey data from 5,280 youth across 104 juvenile residential facilities that submitted data biannually from October 2019 to April 2022. Youth who were exiting a residential treatment program or facility were included in the sample. Youth who were exiting community supervision were excluded. Youth and facility characteristics are presented in Table 1.

Measures

Dependent Variable

The current study examines how prepared youth feel to return to school upon release from secure placement. Specifically, the dependent variable for this study comes from the question asking youth if they have a plan for their long-term education and employment that is helpful. Responses were measured on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree. Due to the small number of responses in the Disagree and Strongly Disagree categories, these two response categories were collapsed into one. Therefore, our dependent variable is coded 1 = Disagree/Strongly Disagree, 2 = Agree, and 3 = Strongly Agree.

Independent Variables

The independent variables for the current study come from the following domains: helpful experiences, reentry plan, essential documents possession, living arrangements, aftercare programming, and community activities.

The survey question measuring *helpful experiences* asked youth to identify which experiences with staff and case managers helped the youth be most ready for reentry. We included two variables from this question: “helped me with my education/GED” and “helped me better understand my strengths and talents.” These variables were coded dichotomously (1 = Yes, 0 = No).

The survey questions measuring *reentry plan* asked youth how much they agree or disagree with a set of statements about their reentry plan. The present study included 8 variables from this series of questions: “I have transportation to get to school and/or work,” “It will be easy to pay my rent/living expenses,” “I have enough money to buy food and clothing,” “I have child care for my child(ren) while I’m at school and/or work,” “I have the supports I need for a successful reentry,” “I am confident I will achieve my reentry goals,” “I understand what is expected of me when I leave,” and “I can comply with/meet the expectations of my reentry plan.” These variables were measured on a 4-point Likert scale: 1 = Strongly Agree, 2 = Agree, 3 = Disagree, and 4 = Strongly Disagree.

The survey question measuring *essential documents possession* asked youth to identify which items from a list they have in their possession or can easily get if they need them. The listed items included a valid ID (license, state ID, school ID), birth certificate, Social Security card, passport, medical records, immunization records, prescriptions, and a cell phone. Each of these were included in the analyses and were coded dichotomously (1 = Yes, 0 = No).

Living arrangements were measured by asking the youth where they will sleep most of the time after release. Response categories included home with family, friend’s house, with significant other, shelter, couch surfing, outdoors, car, transitional housing, programs/facilities, and other place. Factor analysis was conducted to determine what, if any, underlying structure exists for the measures. Principal components analysis produced a three-component solution. Component 1 included the variables of sleep at a shelter, couch surfing, outside, and in a car. This component was labeled *Unstable Living Arrangements*. Component 2 included sleeping at transitional housing, at a program/facility, and at home with family. This component was labeled *Stable Living Arrangements*. Component 3 included sleeping at a friend’s house and with a significant other. This component was labeled *Semi-Stable Living Arrangements*. Component scores were calculated using the post-estimation predict command and were mean centered for inclusion in the analysis.

The survey question measuring *aftercare programming* asked youth if they will be going to any community services, aftercare, or other kind of program when they leave the facility. The response categories were coded 1 = Yes, 2 = No, and 3 = Don’t Know. The reference category for the analysis was 1 = Yes.

Finally, the survey question measuring *community activities* asked youth if, over the past year or so, they have ever been told about ways to pay for college (e.g., financial aid packages and loans). This variable was coded dichotomously (1 = Yes, 0 = No).

Control Variables

The present study controls for youth demographics and facility demographics. *Youth demographics* included age, race/ethnicity, gender, and whether the youth have children. Age was a continuous variable, ranging from 8 to 24, and was mean centered for the analysis. Racial/ethnic categories included White (alone), Black (alone), Hispanic (any), American Indian/Alaskan Native/Asian/Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander, and Other. For the analysis, White served as the reference group. Gender was coded dichotomously (1 = Male and 0 = Female). Whether youth have children was coded dichotomously, (1 = Yes and 0 = No).

Facility demographics included measures about facility type and location. Facility type included correctional, detention, and assessment. Facility area included rural, suburban, and urban. Facility region included Midwest, Northeast, South, and West. For the analysis, correction facility, rural, and Midwest served as reference categories for facility type, facility area, and facility region, respectively.

Analytic Strategy

The analytic methods used in this study included descriptive statistics, bivariate analyses, and ordinal logistic regression. Descriptive statistics were used to identify the level of agreeableness among youth in their preparedness for educational reentry. Bivariate analyses were used to examine the relationship between level of preparedness and living arrangements, and level of preparedness and essential documents possession. Ordinal logistic regression was used to identify which factors helped youth feel more prepared for educational reentry.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Youth and facility descriptive statistics are presented in Table 1. Youth included in the sample were primarily ages 16 to 18, male, Black, and childless. Youth were primarily detained in correction facilities, rural areas, and in the West region. Table 2 presents descriptive statistics of youth's level of preparedness for reentry. Among the sample, most of the youth strongly agree (55.68%) or agree (41.76%) that they have a plan for their long-term education and employment that is helpful. Very few youths disagree/strongly disagree (2.56%) that they have a helpful long-term plan.

Table 1*Youth and Facility Characteristics*

Variable	n	(%)
Youth Characteristics		
<i>Age</i>		
8-12	7	0.13%
13	26	0.49%
14	155	2.94%
15	480	9.09%
16	981	18.58%
17	1,608	30.45%
18	1,359	25.74%
19	398	7.54%
20	216	4.09%
21-24	50	0.94%
<i>Race/Ethnicity</i>		
White, alone	1,660	31.44%
Black, alone	1,359	35.74%
Hispanic (any)	1,052	19.92%
American Indian/Alaskan Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander	227	4.30%
Other	454	8.60%
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	4,734	89.66%
Female	546	10.34%
<i>Have Children</i>		
Yes	1,396	26.44%
No	3,884	73.56%
Facility Characteristics		
<i>Facility Type</i>		
Correction	5,140	97.35%
Detention	95	1.80%
Assessment	45	0.85%
<i>Facility Area</i>		
Rural	2,991	56.65%
Suburban	1,349	25.55%
Urban	940	17.80%
<i>Facility Region</i>		
Midwest	1,527	28.92%
Northeast	700	13.26%
South	828	15.68%
West	2,225	42.14%
Total	5,280	

Table 2

Youth Have a Plan for Their Long-Term Education and Employment that is Helpful

Agreement Level	n	(%)
Strongly Agree	2,940	55.68%
Agree	2,205	41.76%
Disagree/Strongly Disagree	135	2.56%
Total	5,280	100.00%

Bivariate Analyses

Figure 1 presents a comparison of living arrangements among youth who disagree/strongly disagree, agree, and strongly agree they are prepared for educational reentry with a helpful long-term plan. The majority of youth across all levels of agreement indicate they plan to live at home with their families upon release. Notably, youth who disagree/strongly disagree that they have a helpful long-term plan are more likely to indicate they will sleep in a semi-stable (staying at a friend’s house and with a significant other) or unstable living arrangement (sleeping in a car, outdoors, couch surfing, and at a shelter).

Figure 1

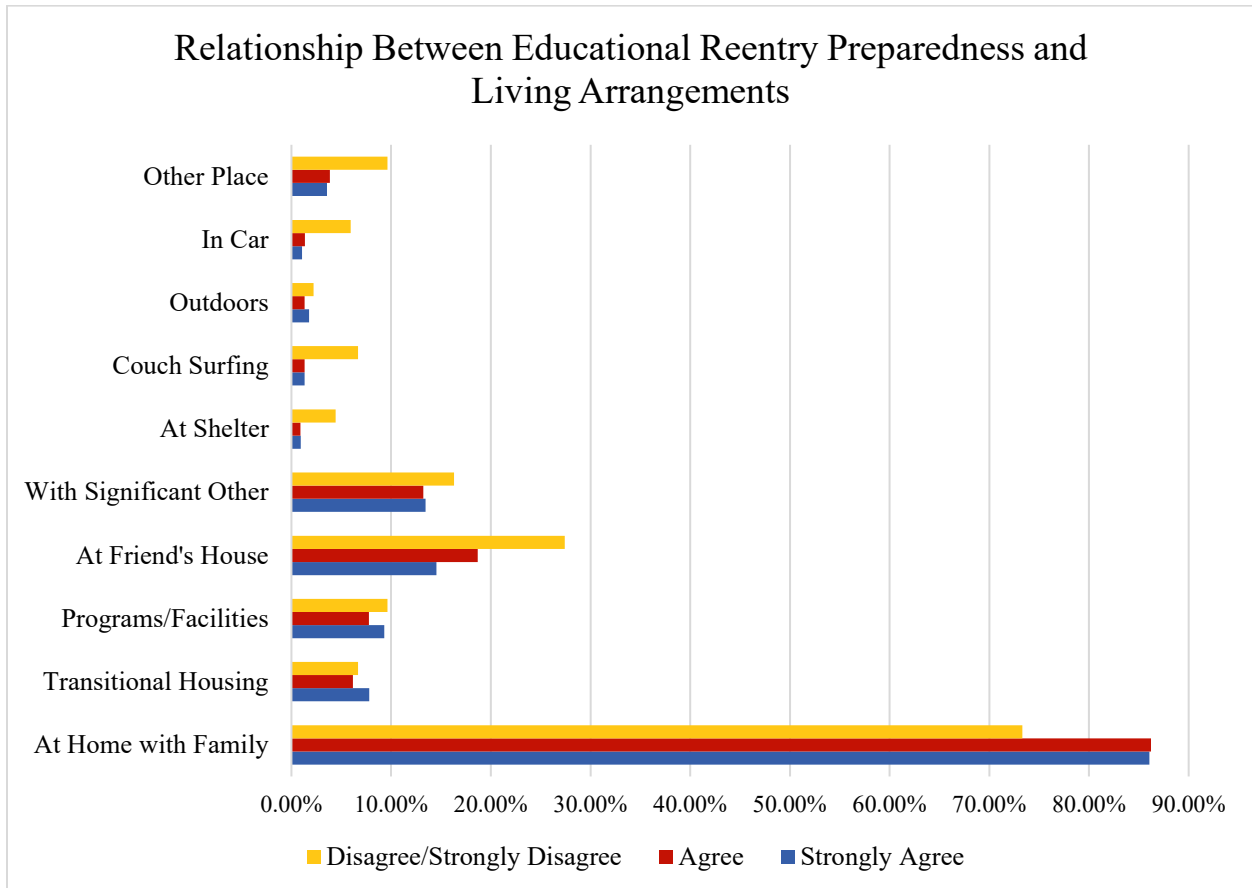
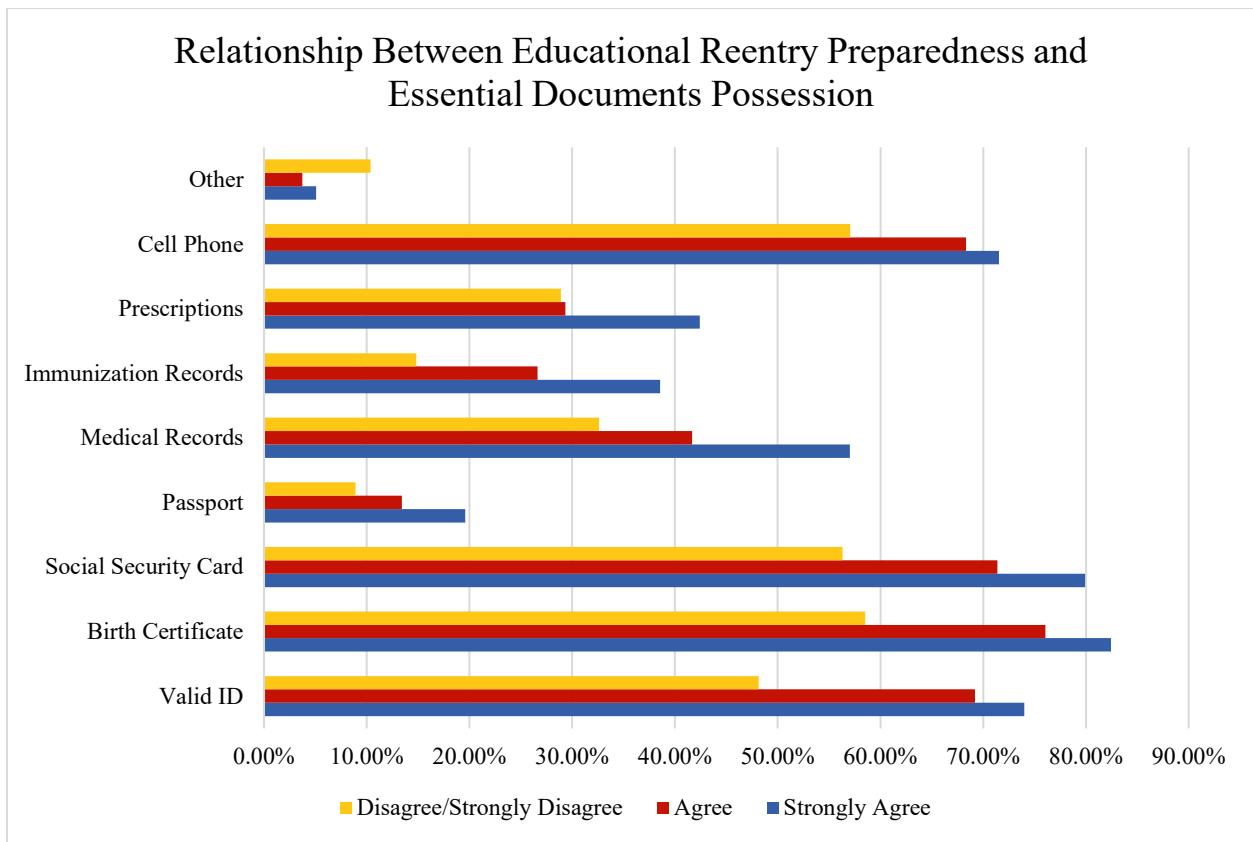


Figure 2 presents a comparison of essential document possession among youth who disagree/strongly disagree, agree, and strongly agree they are prepared for educational reentry with a helpful long-term plan. Most youth indicate they have possession of, or can get possession of, a valid ID, birth certificate, Social Security card, and a cell phone. A smaller proportion of youth indicate they have access to their medical records, immunization records, and prescriptions. Notably, youth who disagree/strongly disagree that they have a helpful long-term plan for their education are less likely to have access to any of the essential documents than youth who agree and strongly agree to have a helpful plan.

Figure 2



Ordinal Logistic Regression

Ordinal logistic regression models the odds of having a particular score or less on the dependent variable. In other words, it models the probability of being observed in a higher category on the dependent variable. The dependent variable for this study measures the level of agreeableness of being prepared for educational reentry. Our ordinal logistic regression model predicts the odds of being in higher agreement on educational reentry preparedness. The results of our model are presented in Table 3.

Except for Hispanic, there were no significant differences in the outcome by race/ethnicity, age, or sex. Compared to White youth, Hispanic youth had 36.5% higher odds of being in a higher

category of agreement on educational reentry preparedness. There were no significant differences in the outcome by facility type, facility area, or facility region.

Among the helpful experiences domain, youth who had help with their education/GED and had help better understanding their strengths and talents were significantly more likely to be in higher agreement on educational reentry preparedness than youth who did not receive this help. Specifically, youth who received help with their education/GED had 33% higher odds than youth who did not receive educational assistance of being in a higher category of agreement. Youth who received help with their strengths and talents had 36.3% higher odds of being in a higher category of agreement than youth who did not receive this help.

Notably, youth who had been told about ways to pay for college (e.g., financial aid packages and loans), were significantly more likely to be in higher agreement on educational reentry preparedness than youth who did not receive this information. Specifically, youth who received information about financial aid had 41.8% higher odds of being in a higher category of agreement.

Among the reentry plan domain, the results suggest that youth who were in lower agreement on the reentry plan variables were less likely to be prepared for educational reentry. Specifically, youth who were less likely to have transportation, able to pay their living expenses, have childcare, supports for successful reentry, be confident in their reentry goals, understand the expectations of their reentry, and comply with the expectations of their reentry were significantly less likely to be in a higher level of agreement on reentry preparedness.

Notably, compared to youth who strongly agreed they have the supports they need for a successful reentry, youth who agreed and disagreed had 51.9% and 81.8% significantly lower odds of being in higher agreement, respectively. Compared to youth who strongly agreed they were confident in their goals, youth who agreed, disagreed, and strongly disagreed had 71.8%, 94.4%, and 90.8% significantly lower odds of being in higher agreement on educational reentry preparedness, respectively. Compared to youth who strongly agreed they understand what is expected of them when they leave, youth who agreed, disagreed, and strongly disagreed had 58.8%, 72.9%, and 97.3% significantly lower odds of being more prepared for educational reentry, respectively. Further, compared with youth who strongly agreed they could comply with the expectations of their reentry plan, youth who agreed and disagreed had 72.1% and 69.8% lower odds of being in higher agreement, respectively.

Despite visual differences in the relationship between educational reentry preparedness and possession of essential documents, none of these variables significantly predicted being more prepared for educational reentry. Similarly, living arrangements were not significant predictors of educational reentry preparedness. Semi-stable living arrangements was slightly significant ($p < .05$) and suggested youth with semi-stable housing had 7.1% lower odds of being in higher agreement.

Finally, compared to youth who will be going to community services, aftercare, or other kind of program when they leave, youth who will not be going to these services had 23.1% significantly lower odds of being in higher agreement of educational reentry preparedness.

Table 3*Ordinal Logistic Regression Results for Educational Reentry Preparedness*

Variable	OR	SE	95% CI		p
			LL	UL	
<i>Helpful Experiences</i>					
Education and GED	1.330	0.115	1.123	1.576	0.001***
Talents and Strengths	1.363	0.121	1.146	1.621	0.000***
<i>Reentry Plan^a</i>					
Transportation					
Agree	0.552	0.069	0.432	0.705	0.000***
Disagree	0.525	0.105	0.3555	0.776	0.001***
Strongly Disagree	0.550	0.216	0.254	1.189	0.129
Living Expenses					
Agree	0.517	0.067	0.402	0.666	0.000***
Disagree	0.454	0.073	0.332	0.621	0.000***
Strongly Disagree	0.654	0.211	0.347	1.233	0.189
Food Expenses					
Agree	0.973	0.127	0.754	1.257	0.835
Disagree	0.982	0.178	0.688	1.402	0.920
Strongly Disagree	0.759	0.272	0.376	1.530	0.441
Childcare					
Agree	0.562	0.118	0.372	0.848	0.006**
Disagree	0.943	0.210	0.340	1.219	0.176
Strongly Disagree	0.199	0.105	0.071	0.558	0.002**
Do Not Have Children	0.620	0.112	0.435	0.883	0.008**
Supports					
Agree	0.481	0.054	0.386	0.601	0.000***
Disagree	0.182	0.059	0.096	0.345	0.000***
Strongly Disagree	0.460	0.386	0.088	2.389	0.355
Confident in Goals					
Agree	0.282	0.030	0.229	0.348	0.000***
Disagree	0.056	0.022	0.026	0.121	0.000***
Strongly Disagree	0.092	0.089	0.014	0.607	0.013*
Understand Expectations					
Agree	0.412	0.048	0.328	0.518	0.000***
Disagree	0.271	0.138	0.099	0.736	0.010**
Strongly Disagree	0.027	0.029	0.003	0.239	0.001***
Comply with Expectations					
Agree	0.279	0.032	0.224	0.350	0.000***
Disagree	0.302	0.129	0.130	0.699	0.005**
Strongly Disagree	0.721	0.867	0.068	7.601	0.786
<i>Essential Documents</i>					
Valid ID	1.069	0.101	0.888	1.287	0.483
Birth Certificate	0.970	0.128	0.749	1.257	0.820

Table 3*Ordinal Logistic Regression Results for Educational Reentry Preparedness*

Variable	OR	SE	95% CI		p
			LL	UL	
Social Security Card	0.946	0.119	0.739	1.212	0.662
Medical Records	1.172	0.120	0.959	1.431	0.121
Immunization Records	1.102	0.125	0.882	1.377	0.392
Prescriptions	1.046	0.107	0.855	1.279	0.661
Cell Phone	0.879	0.083	0.732	1.058	0.175
<i>Living Arrangements</i>					
Stable Living Arrangement	0.992	0.033	0.929	1.059	0.819
Semi-Stable Living Arrangement	0.929	0.033	0.866	0.997	0.041*
Unstable Living Arrangement	1.041	0.034	0.975	1.112	0.227
<i>Community Activities</i>					
Financial Aid Assistance	1.418	0.133	1.179	1.705	0.000***
<i>Aftercare Programming</i>					
Community Program ^b					
No	0.769	0.077	0.632	0.938	0.009**
Don't Know	0.926	0.101	0.748	1.147	0.483
<i>Demographics</i>					
Age	0.956	0.029	0.901	1.015	0.140
Race/Ethnicity ^c					
Black	1.080	0.115	0.877	1.329	0.468
Hispanic	1.365	0.171	1.069	1.744	0.013*
American Indian/Alaskan Native	0.866	0.175	0.584	1.286	0.477
Other	0.9118	0.142	0.678	1.242	0.578
Gender	0.811	0.119	0.609	1.082	0.154
<i>Facility Type^d</i>					
Detention	0.731	0.218	0.407	1.311	0.293
Assessment	0.889	0.418	0.354	2.235	0.803
<i>Facility Area^e</i>					
Suburban	1.099	0.113	0.899	1.344	0.354
Urban	1.055	0.122	0.841	1.322	0.644
<i>Facility Region^f</i>					
Northeast	0.874	0.125	0.661	1.157	0.347
South	1.063	0.145	0.814	1.388	0.652
West	0.859	0.091	0.698	1.057	0.151

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$; Pseudo $R^2 = 0.4724$

^a Reference group is Strongly Agree.

^b Reference group is Yes.

^c Reference group is White.

^d Reference group is Correction.

^e Reference group is Rural.

^f Reference group is Midwest.

Discussion

Juvenile justice-involved youth, despite their history of poor academic performance, can make significant educational gains with proper and intensive instruction in a relatively short period of time while in a residential facility. In addition, youth who achieve these academic gains are more likely to desist from crime. However, research has shown that youth struggle to reenroll and stay in school post-release, increasing their risk of school failure, dropping out, and recidivating. Research on community reintegration and school reentry has identified numerous difficulties and barriers that can prevent youth from successfully transitioning back to school after their release from a juvenile justice facility. However, youths' perceptions of the barriers that they believe to be standing in their way of successful reentry remains largely unknown.

This study has contributed to the literature by further exploring how prepared youth are to reenter the community and return to school and the factors that influence their preparedness. Through this study, we found that youth who received educational assistance and had a positive behavioral outlook on their goals were more likely to report being prepared for educational reentry. Specifically, youth who received help with their education/GED and were provided with information on financial aid were significantly more likely to be prepared for reentry. Additionally, youth who had help better understanding their strengths and talents, were confident in their reentry goals, and understood and could comply with their reentry expectations were significantly more prepared. Further, youth who felt they had a strong support system for their successful reentry were more likely to be prepared than youth who did not feel they had a strong support system.

Our study also found that it is important for youth to have structural supports for reentry. Namely, youth who have transportation to get to school and/or work, can pay their rent/living expenses, and have childcare for while they are at school are more likely to be prepared for educational reentry than youth who do not have these structural supports. Finally, youth receiving continuing care in the community were more likely to be prepared for educational reentry than youth not attending community programs.

These findings support the need for reentry programming that begins while the youth is incarcerated and extends beyond their return to the community. These programs should provide continuing education assistance and prioritize the continuity of youths' academic career post-release (DOE & DOJ, 2014; Mathur, Clark, & Gau, 2021). Additionally, it is important that the programming youth receive while they are detained or committed in juvenile justice facilities increases their confidence in their goals and reentry expectations. Finally, it is important that youth continue receiving support post-release through aftercare programming and assistance with acquiring transportation, childcare, and financial assistance.

About the Authors

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Disclaimer

This research was conducted with access to the PbS Researchers Dataset. The views expressed are those of the author and do not reflect the views of PbS.

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