
Stepping Home Elements – Reentry

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Purpose: Research has repeatedly highlighted the need for youth involved in the juvenile legal system to experience seamless transitions from institutional settings back to their communities. This concept is often referred to as reentry, which is defined in this document as the continuum of preparation for release, the transition to the community, and continuity of care following release from a carceral setting. In the context of the Stepping Home Model, counties can provide quality reentry supports to promote the healing, accountability, and rehabilitation of youth in the juvenile legal system and to ensure their long-term success and wellbeing after incarceration. Utilizing scholarly research and grey literature, this brief summarizes components that are important for reentry programs for youth in the juvenile legal system and provides relevant resources and toolkits.

Search Strategy: We searched the terms “aftercare” and “reentry” in combination with the keywords “juvenile,” “youth,” “serious offenses,” “best practices,” and “meta-analysis” in the following databases: Google Scholar; ScienceDirect; Wiley Online Library; Sage Publications. We also searched these terms in the resource libraries of the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP).

Results and Conclusion: The time period of reentry can generally be considered to be six months after a youth is released from incarceration, but may be longer or shorter depending on several factors such as the youth’s needs or their legal case. The process of reentry for youth should ideally start upon their entry to the carceral setting and continue through their transition back to community and for a period of time after release. While the literature shows mixed results on the combination of programs that are most effective in supporting youth during reentry, research has identified a common set of components for reentry programs that can help youth achieve and maintain long-term success and wellbeing in their communities. These components include individualized programming, mental and behavioral health interventions and services, educational and vocational opportunities, family involvement, linkages to services, cross-system collaboration, continuity of care, and credible messengers programs.

DEFINING REENTRY

There is ambiguity in how the term *reentry* is used in the research literature and in non-academic contexts. However, for the purposes of the Stepping Home Model, based on the current literature as well as California statute, we define reentry as both a time period and a process.

Reentry refers to the time period following an individual's release from a carceral facility as they transition back to their community. This time period can generally be considered to be six months, but it can be longer or shorter depending on the individual's needs as well as other factors including their legal case. In the definition of reentry used in this document, there is no minimum time period for an individual to have spent in a carceral facility for indicating a need for a reentry process. The reentry time period begins the moment an individual leaves the carceral setting, whether they are in a detention setting for one night or a secure youth treatment facility (SYTF) for one year.

As a process, reentry refers to the preparation of and planning for individuals before they leave the carceral setting. This prerelease preparation and planning typically includes reintegrative services and interventions provided by oversight agencies including probation and the court as well as community-based organizations and resources, which are often referred to as reentry programs. The process of reentry should ideally begin the day an individual arrives to the carceral setting and should continue through their commitment and transition back to their community after their release.

It should be noted that the process of reentry differs from the "Stepping Home" process that describes the transition of youth in SYTFs to less restrictive programs (LRPs) throughout their commitment as progress is made in their Individualized Rehabilitation Plans. However, both the reentry process and "Stepping Home" process can overlap as youth make progress in programming detailed in their Plans that can prepare them for the transition to the community *and* can result in their transition to LRPs. Moreover, in the "Stepping Home" process, the California Welfare and Institutions Code, Section 875 states that the court may order youth in LRPs to return to SYTFs for a willful material failure to comply, which is repeated unacceptable behavior and infractions *purposely* committed by a youth. The process of reentry does not include this type of transfer between SYTFs and LRPs and only refers to the programming and planning that will prepare youth for their eventual release to their communities and that supports youth newly released to the community who have completed their commitment in the juvenile legal system.

Additionally, the term *aftercare* is often used interchangeably with reentry in the scientific and gray literature. Aftercare is most commonly used to refer to the court-ordered, post-commitment programming that youth must comply with under probation's oversight. Given the specificity of this term to a primary focus on court-involved services, this document will only use the term reentry as described above as both a time period and a process. Differentiations between these two usages of the term reentry will be highlighted throughout the document.

Current peer-reviewed literature indicates mixed results regarding the effectiveness of reentry programs for youth in the JLS (Abrams et al., 2014; Kvamme et al., 2021; OJJDP, 2017). Additionally, recidivism is still the most used outcome measure across studies, which does not capture the full picture of a young person's success and wellbeing after incarceration. Nonetheless, the literature highlights the specific needs of youth in the JLS that should be considered when providing reentry programs. The following sections discuss components of the reentry process that address these needs, based on the existing literature. Additional outcomes beyond recidivism that are important to the [Stepping Home Model](#) are also discussed, such as educational advancement, employment opportunities, improved health, and strengthened family ties.

COMPONENTS FOR REENTRY

Individualized Programming: Individualized programming refers to the tailored interventions and services that youth receive during their confinement and in the community. Research demonstrates that programming and interventions that are tailored to youth's specific needs and strengths show the most promise for youth's long-term success, including reduced recidivism and other positive outcomes related to mental health, education, and employment (Silver et al., 2023; Spencer and Walker, 2004; Zajac et al., 2015). When tailoring individualized programming for youth, research suggests that agencies and systems utilize ongoing screening and assessment tools that are validated and reliable to measure the needs, strengths, and goals of youth that can be addressed through interventions and services (Cavanagh, 2022; Nelson and Vincent, 2018). Examples of such tools include the [Youth Level of Service/Case Management Inventory](#) assessment and the [Youth Assessment and Screening Instrument](#) (OJJDP, 2015). To improve effectiveness, individualized programming can be created in partnership with youth and their families (Cavanagh, 2022), and can also consider components associated with the youth's legal case, length of facility stay, and availability of resources. Additionally, in relation to the Stepping Home Model, the youth's [Individualized Rehabilitation Plan](#) can reflect these individualized interventions and services as well as the youth's goals and milestones. Individualized programming provided during the reentry process that is created in partnership with youth and relevant parties can help ensure that youth are successful, well after their return to their communities.

Mental and behavioral health interventions and services: Higher rates of mental health and substance use challenges are common among youth in the JLS ([Zajac et al., 2015](#)). Youth often face unaddressed traumas, losses, and mental health needs (Dierkhising, 2013), which can be exacerbated by incarceration ([Barnert et al., 2017](#)). Research highlights that individualized programming for youth in the JLS should also include interventions and services that address mental and behavioral health concerns (Zajac et al., 2015). Screening and assessing youth for immediate mental health needs and concerns that may require special attention utilizing validated, reliable tools can help agencies identify the proper interventions and services. Examples of such tools include the [Massachusetts Youth Screening Instrument—Version 2](#) and the [Achenbach Systems](#) (OJJDP, 2017). Additionally, research

suggests that screening youth for trauma exposure and trauma-related symptoms is also essential when providing mental and behavioral health interventions and services¹ (Kerig, 2015). Validated tools that can assist agencies with identifying trauma exposure in youth include the [Child Abuse and Trauma Scale](#) and [Center for Youth Wellness ACE Questionnaire](#).

A meta-review on “what works” for youth involved in the JLS demonstrates that the mental health interventions associated with the most reductions in recidivism include multi-systemic therapy, cognitive behavioral therapy, and family functional therapy (Pappas and Dent, 2021). Regarding treating trauma-related symptoms, trauma focused cognitive behavioral therapy shows the most empirical support for reducing recidivism and mental health symptoms like depression, anxiety, and anger in youth in the JLS (Olaghere et al., 2021). For more resources related to behavioral health, including the treatment of substance use disorders, counties can reference [Practice Guidelines for Treating Behavioral Health Disorders in SYTFs and Other Facilities](#) by the Office of Youth and Community Restoration (OYCR).

Educational and Vocational Programming: Education and employment statuses strongly predict success following incarceration (Abrams et al., 2011; Ashford & Gallagher, 2019; Barnert et al., 2017; OJJDP, 2017). However, youth involved in the JLS tend to have a lower academic achievement level than their counterparts, with grade repetition and learning disabilities being common (Christian, 2022). These findings collectively underscore the importance of integrating educational and vocational opportunities into reentry programs to equip youth with the skills and qualifications necessary for employment and community reintegration. Several resources, such as the U.S. Department of Education and Justice’s joint guide, [Guiding Principles for Providing High-Quality Education in Juvenile Justice Secure Care Settings](#), can assist counties in providing education to youth in their facilities. To assist counties in providing youth with opportunities for higher education (e.g., college and university), OYCR’s guide [Building Higher Education Pathways](#) can be referenced, and programs such as [Project Rebound](#) and [Underground Scholars](#) can be leveraged.

Regarding vocational outcomes, youth previously involved in the JLS tend to earn less income in adulthood compared to youth not involved in the JLS and face barriers to employment because of their past involvement in the JLS (Taylor, 2016). Fortunately, recent research shows that employers are beginning to have better perceptions of youth formerly involved in the JLS and are more open to hiring them compared to prior years (Unruh et al., 2023). Training youth in employment readiness skills as part of programming in the reentry process by using behavior analytics practices and aligning career and technical programs offered to youth with local labor trends can further increase their likelihood of gaining employment after incarceration and their long-term success and wellbeing (Unruh et al., 2023). Existing guides that can assist counties in improving vocational outcomes for youth in their jurisdictions include the National Youth Employment Coalition’s [Job Training for Youth with Justice Involvement: A Toolkit](#) and the Council of State Government’s [LOCKED OUT: Improving Educational and Vocational Outcomes for Incarcerated Youth](#) guide.

¹ “Trauma” to be further explored in forthcoming trauma-informed care brief by OYCR.

Family Involvement: The components discussed above reflect interventions and programming at the individual level. However, involving the youth's family in services provided during the reentry process is also crucial to improve the success of youth (Spencer and Walker, 2004). Research demonstrates that youth involved in the JLS who have increased family contact were one and a half times more likely to have both educational and employment reentry plans in place in comparison to their peers with no family contact (Ruch and Yoder, 2018). Additional research also highlights other positive outcomes in relation to increased family involvement, including: 1) Improved parental ability to provide instrumental and emotional support to youth; 2) Improvements in court functioning; and 3) Improvements in youth behavior (Walker et al., 2015). However, a federal survey of practitioners and actors in the JLS found that family engagement was the most operationally challenging issue, with barriers including families being seen as outsiders, visitation challenges, and families lacking knowledge and understanding of processes in the JLS (OJJDP, 2018).

Current strategies to improve family involvement that are prevalent in the literature include: 1) policies that encourage family engagement; 2) materials that help families to understand processes in the JLS; and 3) programs and practices such as family visitation, parent training, and family therapy (OJJDP, 2018). Evidence-based family therapy programs that can improve family involvement include functional family therapy, multisystemic therapy, and multisystemic therapy-family integrated transitions (Greenwood 2008; OJJDP, 2018; Trupin, 2011). Additionally, to help in their efforts to improve family involvement, counties can refer to guides including the Vera Institute's [*Identifying, Engaging, and Empowering Families: A Charge for Juvenile Justice Agencies*](#), the Annie E. Casey Foundation's [*Family Engagement Framework*](#), and the National Reentry Resource Center's [*Engaging the Families of Youth Reentering Rural Communities*](#).

Linkages to Services: In addition to the individualized programming and services that youth receive during the reentry process, linkages to services in the community can also be provided to help youth navigate the challenges faced during the transition into their communities as well as those of young adulthood. Transitioning to adulthood is an already difficult process as individuals grapple with developing autonomy, maintaining relationships, and finding employment and educational opportunities, among other challenges (Barnert et al., 2024). These difficulties, particularly those related to basic needs, can often be exacerbated for youth transitioning back to their communities after residing in carceral facilities. Research suggests that individualized programming and services has limited utility for youth returning to their communities if their basic needs are not met (Myers et al., 2018). For instance, the Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice indicates that some of the most pressing needs for youth reentering their communities after incarceration include housing, income assistance, and access to health care (De Nike et al., 2019).

Linkages to services in the community can include access to services that support young people in meeting these basic needs, such as housing placements and linkages to community health services and Medi-Cal insurance. Other robust supports that can be provided through community-based services to encourage youth in their journeys through and after

incarceration include gang intervention, life skills training, basic income assistance, and spiritual and restorative services, as detailed in the Stepping Home Model. Guides that can assist counties in building connections to housing and health access include the Council of State Government's [Building Connections to Housing During Reentry](#) and the Health and Reentry Project's [Redesigning Reentry: How Medicaid Can Improve Health and Safety by Smoothing Transitions from Incarceration to Community](#).

Cross-system Collaboration: Youth in the JLS and their families have diverse needs and goals that cannot be addressed by only one agency or system. Cross-system collaboration can promote a continuous system of services for youth and families by enhancing the strengths of partnering agencies and programs to provide a variety of services and programming that address youth and families' needs and goals (Stewart, 2013). Research has found that organizational barriers can significantly impact the reentry process for youth (O'Neill, 2017). Inter-organizational barriers, or those experienced between systems and agencies, include poor communication and collaboration, lack of supports, and vertical service provision gaps (O'Neill, 2017). Based on research and experience in assisting jurisdictions and organizations in improving these types of barriers and cross-system collaboration efforts, the Forum for Youth Investment (2023) has created [five tenets](#) for successful cross-system collaboration:

- Have a shared vision and goals, including agreement on the population to be served, the issue the collaboration will address, and the desired outcome.
- Include multiple perspectives and voices, from legislators to impacted families.
- Communicate clearly, regularly, and inclusively using robust communication mechanisms.
- Create buy-in at all levels to promote understanding and sense of ownership in improving policies and practices.
- Measure impact by regularly collecting information on key activities, evaluating efforts periodically, and learning from the information generated.

Improving cross-system collaboration across counties can help ensure that reentry processes are as smooth and uninterrupted as possible for youth in the JLS. Additional guides that can assist counties in improving their cross-system collaboration efforts include Pathways' [Achieving Cross-System Collaboration to Support Young People in the Transition Years](#) and [Successfully Collaborating With the Juvenile Justice System: Benefits, Challenges, and Key Strategies](#) by the Technical Assistance Partnership for Child and Family Mental Health.

Continuity of Care: Research underscores the importance of continuity of care in addressing the multifaceted needs of youth after having their educational, vocational, and psychological trajectories disrupted by incarceration (Terry and Abrams, 2017). Continuity of care in the reentry context is defined as "a strategy to foster resilience and promote social inclusion by seeking to sustain gains and benefits attained while in a correctional facility upon return to the community" (Altschuer, 2009). There are five aspects of continuity of care: 1) continuity of

control, which refers to the structure and supervision that youth experience through reentry and into their communities; 2) continuity in range of services; 3) continuity in program and service content; 4) continuity of social environment, which ensures that youth maintain social support and interaction throughout the reentry journey; and 5) continuity of attachment, in which youth develop trusting relationships with positive and responsible mentors (Altschuer, 2009). These five components to continuity of care reflect a collective effort between oversight agencies and existing community-based organizations to ensure the maintenance of treatments, services, support, and programming after incarceration. JLS facilities can collaborate with community-based agencies to ensure youth are linked to appropriate health and social services in the community (Committee on Adolescence et al., 2011). To improve continuity of care, research suggests that agencies and organizations share relevant clinical information, behavioral health diagnoses, and services rendered during confinement; and recommend follow-up with youth, families, and providers when appropriate (Committee on Adolescence et al., 2011).

Credible Messengers: Credible messengers are mentors who share similar lived experiences and community origins as youth involved in the JLS, allowing them to build authentic rapport, trust, and connection with youth to support them in their rehabilitative journeys (Lesnick et al., 2023). Credible messenger mentoring programs, though limited in empirical research, align with the growing recognition of community violence and carceral system involvement as significant determinants of health and show promise in positively impacting youth involved in the JLS (Lesnick et al., 2023). Credible messenger mentoring is associated with improvements in psychological social skills, achievement of individual goals, and reduced risk behaviors among youth in the JLS (Lesnick et al., 2023). Furthermore, mentees have reported relatability as a key component of feeling supported in their goals, which translates into trust within their community. Credible messenger mentoring programs such as [AIM](#) and [the Peacemaker Fellowship](#) (Cramer et al., 2018; Corburn et al., 2021) and similar social support programs can be leveraged in reentry service delivery to provide youth with responsible and positive mentors, maintain their development and progress made during the reentry period, and promote their long-term success and overall wellbeing after incarceration.

CONCLUSION

Reentry programs play a critical role in supporting youth's transitions back into their communities after incarceration by promoting positive development and self-sufficiency. Successful programs offer structured support, aiming to address the multifaceted needs that this population faces. By providing continuity of care, from in-custody treatment through to reintegration into society, these programs help to ensure that the progress made during incarceration is not lost. Reentry programs can facilitate a smoother transition by coordinating care across different service providers and ensuring that essential services such as substance use treatment and mental health interventions are integrated and consistent. Moreover, these programs play a significant role in not only reducing recidivism, but also promoting positive social reintegration and long-term positive outcomes in the realms of mental and physical health and educational and academic achievement. When utilized successfully, reentry programs can support youth in achieving and maintaining overall successful, productive lives in their communities after incarceration.

RESOURCES

Individualized programming and behavioral health:

- [Practice Guidelines for Treating Behavioral Health Disorders in SYTFs and Other Facilities](#)
- [Screening and Assessing Mental Health and Substance Use Disorders Among Youth in the Juvenile Justice System](#)
- [Assessing Exposure to Psychological Trauma and Posttraumatic Stress Symptoms in the Juvenile Justice Population](#)
- [Ten Core Competencies for Youth and Young Adult Centered Mental Health Systems](#)

Educational and vocational programming:

- [Guiding Principles for Providing High-Quality Education in Juvenile Justice Secure Care Settings](#)
- [You Got This! Educational Pathways for Youth Transitioning from Juvenile Justice Facilities](#)
- [Building Higher Education Pathways](#)
- [Project Rebound](#)
- [Underground Scholars](#)
- [Job Training for Youth with Justice Involvement: A Toolkit](#)
- [LOCKED OUT: Improving Educational and Vocational Outcomes for Incarcerated Youth](#)
- [Reentry Employment Opportunities \(REO\)](#)

Family and community involvement:

- [Identifying, Engaging, and Empowering Families: A Charge for Juvenile Justice Agencies](#)
- [Family Engagement Framework](#)
- [Engaging the Families of Youth Reentering Rural Communities](#)

Basic needs support:

- [Building Connections to Housing During Reentry](#)

- [Redesigning Reentry: How Medicaid Can Improve Health and Safety by Smoothing Transitions from Incarceration to Community](#)
- [Assessing Housing Needs and Risks: A Screening Questionnaire](#)

Cross-system collaboration:

- [Achieving Cross-System Collaboration to Support Young People in the Transition Years](#)
- [Successfully Collaborating With the Juvenile Justice System: Benefits, Challenges, and Key Strategies](#)

General reentry resources:

- [Reentry Starts Here: A Guide for Youth in Long-Term Juvenile Corrections and Treatment Programs](#)
- [Improving Outcomes for Youth with Disabilities in Juvenile Corrections: Transition and Reentry](#)
- [National Reentry Resource Center \(NRRC\)](#)
- [Youth Returning to the Community from Juvenile Justice Facilities: A Guide for Advocates](#)
- [Collaborative Comprehensive Case Plans](#)
- [Collaborating for Successful Reentry: A Practical Guide to Support Justice-Involved Young People Returning to the Community](#)

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