

Winter 12-3-2018

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Staffin, Samantha, "Community Support Systems for Reentering Young Adults" (2018). *Honors Scholar Theses*. 627.
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Community Support Systems for Reentering Young Adults:
A Qualitative Analysis of Our Piece of the Pie's Reentry Program

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Abstract

Young adults reentering into society after incarceration encounter a variety of obstacles that make their transition particularly difficult. Recidivism is a threat that becomes increasingly present in an environment that has negative societal pressures. In consideration of this, the presence of a healthy community support system is crucial for this population. In depth interviews were conducted with seven young adult participants of the Reentry Program at Our Piece of the Pie, Incorporated (OPP) to determine the quality of their current community support systems. Based on the information collected from interviews, it is evident that the full needs of the population are not being satisfied, leaving the population in possibly vulnerable position. The purpose of this thesis is to identify the trends of community support systems, and indicate where the systems are lacking and how the OPP Reentry Program can help.

Executive Summary

The following table outlines the findings from the interviews conducted and brief recommendations based on these findings. Interview questions adhered to each topic in the table (mental health, housing, education, employment, and financial literacy). The information collected presents that improvements can be made in the Reentry Program to better promote the success of the individuals enrolled.

Topic	Reentry Program's Current System	Interviewee Thoughts	Recommendations
Mental Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • YDS support • Mental Health Professional References 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not comfortable speaking to mental health professional (mismatch between client and provider) • Feel they do not need mental health support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create relationships with mental health providers who young adults are comfortable opening up to

			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish workshops that acknowledge mental health
Housing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mandatory reference to 211 Connecticut 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reliance on family for housing • Homes are stressful and negative places 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a resource book with relevant homeless shelter information • Utilize interns for this project
Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High School Diploma program 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Young adults are satisfied with educational component of the Reentry Program 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No recommendations
Employment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work readiness training • Mock interviews 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Young adults are overall not satisfied with Reentry Program’s employment services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Better use of KUDER assessment • On site career fairs specifically for Reentry Program individuals • List of employers in the area hiring
Financial	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Financial literacy workshops 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Workshops are not being utilized • Reliance on families for support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make workshops mandatory • Design workshops to be more understandable and relatable to the population

Responses to questions asked in the interviews presented useful information about the current state of community support systems for young adults reentering into society after incarceration. Responses to the questions pertaining to health, housing, financial, and employment suggest that there needs to be improvements made to the current programs provided by the Reentry Program at OPP. The questions related to education showed that the Reentry Program is currently meeting the needs of the population it serves in regards to this.

Summary of the Literature

The existing literature on reentry rarely focuses on the reentry process of the young adult population. The literature is often concentrated on the older reentry population. As individuals who have not yet experienced adulthood in its full capacity, young adults reentering into society are a vulnerable population. The literature does not detail the implications of this. However, the literature does discuss the general challenges that the overall reentry population will encounter, as well as the needs of the population. Therefore, the literature can be generalized to reflect many aspects of the young adult, ages 18 through 24, reentry process.

I chose to analyze the mental health, housing, education, employment, and financial conditions of the young adults enrolled in Our Piece of the Pie's Reentry Program. Each of these topics is an element of a community support system and their stability is crucial to a successful reentry. The elements interact with one another and together influence the quality of the reentry transition. If each factor is not adequately addressed, individuals' transitions back into society after incarceration will be much more difficult.

Mental Health

Addressing mental health is a component of the reentry process that has an impact on all parts of a young adult's transition. A study conducted in 2007 suggested that 63% of young males and 71% of young females incarcerated had symptoms of at least one mental health disorder (Anthony et al., 2010). The environment in which an individual grows up influences their mental health. This is also known as the societal determinants of mental health (Allen, Balfour, Bell, & Marmot 2014). There are several factors that are part of this definition, many of which are included in the following: parental influence, families, household situation, community environment, and services readily available for utilization. The impact of these

factors on the mental health of young adults throughout their development may have influenced the choices that the young adults made that led to their incarceration.

The societal determinants of mental health are influential throughout adolescence and adulthood (Allen, Balfour, Bell, & Marmot 2014). Researchers from the World Health Organization collected data from various studies and concluded that mental health conditions like depression and anxiety are overwhelmingly associated with low educational attainment, material disadvantage and unemployment. Further, the lower an individual's socioeconomic status is, the higher that individual's chances are of developing a mental health condition. For the young adult reentry population, they are reentering into society jobless and often no or little educational attainment. Knowing that this population already has high rates of mental health conditions compared to the general population, addressing the factors that influence their mental health is urgent.

Housing

Housing for the young adult reentry population benefits the individuals transitioning because it eliminates the stress of having to continually find new places to sleep. However, if individuals have mental health conditions and/or are unemployed, it becomes much more of a challenge for them to maintain stable housing (Biess & Fontaine 2012). A study conducted by Yale University's Department of Psychiatry found that an ex-offender is 7.3% to 11.3% more likely than an individual in the general population to face homelessness (Greenberg & Rosenheck 2008). Further, individuals who are homeless have a higher likelihood of being arrested more often, incarcerated for longer periods of time, and recidivating (National Health

Care for the Homeless Council 2012). Therefore, housing security for the young adult reentry population is critical.

To further argue the importance of housing stability for ex-offenders, an example of an initiative designed to provide housing to ex-offenders is relevant. In 2007, the State of Washington implemented a program called the Reentry Housing Pilot Program (RHPP). This program provided stable housing and related services to ex-offenders upon their release from incarceration (Lutze, Rosky & Hamilton 2014). In 2014, a group of researchers evaluated this program to discover whether housing security was correlated with recidivism. The researchers found those individuals who were provided housing and related services through RHPP were overall less likely to recidivate.

Education

Having a high school diploma, G.E.D., or some sort of employment certification increases the likelihood that an ex-offender will successfully find a job. With the status of being an ex-offender, the job market becomes a greater challenge. Therefore, having an educational background will increase the chances of being considered for a job opportunity.

Existing literature presents that an estimated 41.3% of the total inmate population does not have a high school diploma or G.E.D., compared to 18.4% of the adult population (Harlow 2003). Further, education levels influence the likelihood of recidivating. A study conducted on 6,561 individuals released from the Indiana Department of Correction from 2005 to 2009 found that recidivism rates for ex-offenders with a college education was 31%, but this rate increased to 55.9% for ex-offenders who did not have a high school diploma or equivalent (Lockwood, Nally, Ho & Knutson 2012). Individuals are entering and being released from the criminal justice

system without an education adequate for the job market. This lack of educational support is further disadvantaging individuals in their reentry transition. Therefore, it is important that the educational needs of the population are being addressed upon their release back into society.

Employment

Finding employment is another important aspect of the reentry process. Employment provides a source of income, as well as allows individuals to feel like productive members of society, who are contributing their skills to the economy. As previously discussed, employment influences mental health. Unemployment may increase an individual's likelihood of developing a mental health condition such as depression or anxiety (Allen, Balfour, Bell, & Marmot 2014), just as having a mental health condition reduces the likelihood of holding a steady job..

The young adult reentry population encounters substantial challenges when looking to obtain employment upon their release. According to the National Institute of Justice, research collected from a series of interviews with young adult ex-offenders suggests that between 60% and 75% of young adults are unemployed up to a year after their release (National Institute of Justice 2013).

The Ban The Box law restricts employers from the ability to inquire about an individual's criminal history on job applications (Agan & Starr 2017). Although eleven states, including Connecticut, have implemented the Ban the Box law, individual's still face significant challenges when trying to obtain employment. This law is intended to eliminate some of the difficulty of getting a job with an ex-offender status. However, a study published in the Quarterly Journal of Economics found that the Ban the Box law actually does more harm than good. The researchers found that upon implementation of the Ban the Box law, the gap of callback rates between white

and African American job applicants increased to 43% from 7% prior to the law's implementation. Therefore, although this law may remove the criminal history question from job applications, it is actually hurting the young adult reentry population for individuals of color.

The labeling theory, the concept that the label of "ex-offender" by society impedes one's ability to obtain employment, is relevant (Apel & Sweeten 2010). On a societal level, the human capital one has to offer is quickly minimized when that individual has an ex-offender status. Further, Apel and Sweeten discuss how on an individual level, the continual stigma attached to the ex-offender label leads individuals to transform their identity in a way that causes them to become unmotivated to continue searching for employment, because they feel they incapable of getting a job regardless their efforts. This inability to obtain employment may cause individual to turn to illegal ways to earn money, hence increasing the likelihood of reincarceration.

Financial

Financial literacy is a component of a stable lifestyle. Financial literacy provides an understanding of how to prevent financial crisis and what possible actions can be taken when financial crises arise. For the young adult reentry population, obtainment of financial literacy is crucial in the transition back into society. A research study conducted by researchers at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock proved that compared to the general population, male individuals incarcerated have much lower rates of financial literacy overall (Galchus 2015). The lack of financial literacy leaves the population vulnerable. For example, without an understanding of budgeting money for monthly expenses (e.g., rent, electricity, etc.), individuals may find themselves in a financial situation that prevents them from further succeeding in their reentry transition.

Research conducted at a medium security correctional facility solidifies the argument that the offender population has very low financial literacy skills. This study, published in the Journal of Correctional Education, found that many offenders in the criminal justice system have more debt than they do savings (Koenig 2007). Although it was found that inmates have an adequate understanding of credit and payroll, they scored poorly on assessments that tested their financial literacy in regards to savings, retirement, interest, cars, budgeting, and insurance. Although this study was not focused on the young adult population, it can be understood that young adults lack similar financial literacy skills. Individuals must become educated in financial literacy in order to successfully rebuild their lives upon their release.

Overall, the current literature regarding the mental health, housing, education, employment, and financial conditions of young adults reentering into society after incarceration suggests that extensive supportive services are needed to help the population succeed in their reentry.

About Our Piece of the Pie, Inc.

Our Piece of the Pie, Incorporated, is a non-profit organization located in Hartford, Connecticut that was founded in 1975. The organization's mission is to "help urban youth become economically independent adults." Serving primarily at-risk Hartford youth between the ages of 14 to 24, OPP achieves this mission through a variety of initiatives and programs. The initiatives and programs are: Leaning Academy, OPPortunity Academy, Youth Business, Work 2 Learn, Pathways to Careers, and Youth Service Corps. OPP emphasizes that the combination of the individual, a supportive relationship, and access to services will bring young adults to

success. Success is measured by graduating high school, completing a post-secondary program, or finding meaningful employment.

Launched in 2017 and funded by the United States Department of Labor, the Reentry Program of OPP provides services to young adults, ages 18 to 24 years who have been released from incarceration within six months prior to enrollment. Recruitment into the program is accomplished by an employee of the Reentry Program, with the title the “Behind the Walls Navigator,” visiting various prison facilities and giving a presentation about the Reentry Program to individuals who are near their release date. These presentations are open to any young adults in the facility to attend. On occasion, the Reentry Program Director, who typically works in the Reentry Program Office, is invited by counselors into the facility along with the Behind the Walls Navigator, to present to and speak with a specific group of young adults. The facilities that the Behind the Walls Navigator enters are the following: Carl Robinson, Corrigan Rodowski, Hartford CC, MacDougal Walker, Mason Youth, Osborn, Willard Cybulski, York, and Cheshire. The employee presents once to current inmates who are 30 or 45 days prior to release and will then have several presentations to counselors and other representatives in the facilities as the release date gets closer. The purpose of the presentations are to get the young adults thinking about what their options are upon their release, and to inform authority figures in the facilities of the Reentry Program and what it has to offer.

The Reentry Program is part of the Pathways to Careers Initiative of OPP. It aims to provide the following services to those enrolled: support services, legal services, work readiness, development, job placement, and educational services. The Program seeks to achieve this through the components of the program.

Individuals enroll into the Reentry Program after they are released. However, relationships between the young adults and Reentry Program employees begin prior to release. The Behind the Walls Navigator will document the needs of individuals, as well as discuss the goals they have upon their release. While this allows the Navigator to determine whether the Reentry Program would be a good fit for the individual, the meetings also allow the individual to establish a connection with a positive adult outside of the prison system. Although the facility presentations happen in several locations, to be eligible for enrollment, the young adults must be reentering into the Hartford area specifically.

Once enrolled, each individual is assigned a Youth Development Specialist (YDS), who is an OPP employee. This individual will help guide the young adult's reentry process. The YDS is responsible for understanding all needs of each of the young adults in their caseload. The YDS acts as a source of encouragement and support throughout the duration of the program. Further, the YDS is intended to be a person whom the individual can confide in, and get advice from when needed. The YDS is expected to connect the individual with outside resources that they may need to ensure a steady transition back into society (e.g, contacts to a food bank, contacts at Planned Parenthood, or where to find transportation).

A primary component of the Reentry Program is to insure all participants earn a high school diploma. Young adults have the opportunity to earn their high school diploma through the Reentry Program. The curriculum is computer based and must be completed at the Reentry Program office under the supervision of a certified instructor. At the Reentry Program office, there is a computer room specifically dedicated for students seeking to complete their high school education. Further, a teacher is readily available in the room to monitor the progress of the individuals and provide assistance and tutoring when needed. The teacher also is available to

assist with any computer literacy concerns. The high school diploma program is self-paced, meaning that it is up to the discretion of the individual to complete it. For this reason, the support and encouragement from each YDS is important for success.

The Reentry Program also emphasizes job readiness and placement. While working towards earning the high school diploma, the young adults are continually encouraged to attend and participate in various job trainings and events. For example, workshops are held in which individuals learn about proper etiquette for a job interview. OPP employees work with individuals to prepare them for a job interview, including hosting a series of mock interviews. Upon completion of the mock interviews, the OPP employees sit with each individual and discuss the strengths and weaknesses they noticed. As the individual progresses through the Reentry Program and has the opportunity for an actual job interview, OPP provides the individual with the professional clothing they need to attend the interview.

Methods

The option to participate in an interview with the researcher was provided to individuals enrolled in the Reentry Program by the Reentry Program Director. The Director discussed the purpose of the interviews with the individuals and explained how the information obtained from interviews will allow the researcher to make suggestions for the Reentry Program that will benefit the individuals enrolled. Further, the Director explained to the individuals that they did not have to participate in the interview if they did not wish to do so. Seven young adults from Our Piece of the Pie's Reentry Program chose to be interviewed by the researcher. Although there are both men and women enrolled in the Reentry Program, all of the seven interviewees

identified as male. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 24 years old, and all were people of color.

Interviews were conducted in private at the OPP Reentry Program office in the spring of 2018. The researcher announced that she would be present for interviewing at the Reentry Program office for a period of three days, for three hours each day. Within these days, individuals came on their own to be interviewed. Interviews lasted from four minutes to fifteen minutes. Two of the conducted interviews were very brief and did not provide the researcher with substantial information. Interviews were recorded via the Voice Memo Application, with the permission of the participant. No identifiable information was collected during the interview process. Upon completion of the interviews, the researcher transcribed the audio files into a Word Document and destroyed the audio files.

Each interview adhered to the same series of questions, which can be located in Appendix A. The questions focused on the main components of a community support system. Topics included various questions from the following categories: family, health, housing, financial, employment, and education. The questions requested participants to speak about the type of support, if any, that they receive in each of these categories. If participants relayed that they did not have support or did not know how to access support in an area, the researcher further probed the individual on why they thought they did not have support or did not know how to access it. The interviews allowed the researcher to understand the type of support systems that are available to the young adults. Most importantly, the interviews exposed the researcher to the resources that are lacking in the support systems for the young adults as they are transitioning back into society.

Interview Analyses and Recommendations

Overall Reliance on Family and Peers

A significant theme found throughout the interviews detailed that the young men heavily rely on family and friends as a main source of support. Six out of seven of the interviewees mentioned that their family and friends have been supportive since their release. This reliance on family and friends as a main source of support is important to note because of the implications it introduces. Researchers at Bowling Green State University found that overall, families are positive influences on an individual's reentry process in terms of substance abuse and re-offending, and peers can often be a negative influence (Boman & Mowen 2017). This is important to note because it shows how social ties can impact the reentry process for better or for worse.

Although it is important to have family and friends during the transition back into society, this support system may not be appropriate for addressing all factors that encompass the reentry process. For example, an individual may have a mental health condition that requires professional support rather than guidance from family and friends. In regard to peers as a negative influence, one individual noted that his friends were the reason he was incarcerated in the first place. Another young man discussed the continual stress among his family that inhibits his ability to "do good things." In order to fully address the needs of the young adult reentry population, the reliance on family and friends, and the benefits and consequences of it must be understood and tempered.

For the Reentry Program, it is important to understand the influence of family and friends on the reentry process. The OPP Reentry Program employees must account for the outside influences that impact the lives of the young adults enrolled in the Reentry Program. Reentry

Program employees should keep in mind that outside of the Reentry Program office, the young adults may be encountering other people who do not have the same desire to help the young adults succeed in their reentry. Because of this, Reentry Program employees should be fully engaged when providing support to the young adults.

Mental Health

Currently, the Reentry Program utilizes the Youth Development Specialists to address the mental health concerns of the young adults. Further reference to professional support will be provided if needed. Out of the seven young adults interviewed, five indicated that they did not have a mental health professional (e.g., therapist or mental health counselor) who they could turn to if they needed emotional guidance. Among those who disclosed that they do not seek mental health professionals, four indicated that they would rather not talk to a professional. They would rather keep their feelings to themselves, or would seek support from family members and friends. One interviewee indicated that he would like to speak with a professional, but he did not have the ability to access one. Many of the young men noted that they felt that they did not need the professional support. As existing literature shows, it is estimated that 63% of young males incarcerated present symptoms for at least one mental health condition (Anthony et al., 2010). Therefore, it may be harmful that emotional well-being is ignored or not validated by the young adults throughout the reentry process.

The two young adults who said that they did have a mental health professional each indicated that, although they could have accessed this professional, they did not feel comfortable doing so. One young adult mentioned “I’m not always put first, you know,” when he discussed how he felt that he was just a part of the mental health professional’s schedule and not an actual

patient seeking support. The other individual indicated discomfort because of the differences between himself and the professional: “At the end of the day, they go and lay down in their bed, and I go and lay down in my bed, and its like we live in different worlds. I mean, if it was somebody I could relate to, maybe.” This suggests a significant mismatch between the client and the professional. The inability for these individuals to connect with the professional and obtain meaningful and genuine support could push them toward ignoring the validity of their emotions and overall mental health. Certainly, this will perpetuate the inability for a healthy and successful transition into society that addresses all aspects of the individuals’ lives.

Recommendations

Based on the interviews, it is apparent that the current strategies for addressing the mental health of the young adult reentry population are not entirely effective. As current research shows, mental health disorders are prominent in this population. Therefore, it is a cause for concern that five of the seven young adults interviewed expressed that they do not have access to professional mental health support, but in any case, they also claim they just do not need it. Additionally, the fact that the two young adults who did seek professional help were not comfortable with their provider is alarming. Neglecting to fully address the mental health of this population may leave the individuals in a vulnerable state, disrupting a successful transition back into society.

The mismatch between mental health professionals and their clients may be preventing the young adults who do access professional support from benefitting. When referring the young adults to mental health professionals, OPP should seek professionals with whom the young adults will be able to connect. For this to occur, the Reentry Program should build relationships with the mental health professionals in the community. Researching the current providers in the

community and understanding their specializations will create a basic understanding of what help is available. Further, reaching out to the professionals and meeting with them to understand their relevancy toward the young adult reentry population will allow the Reentry Program employees to get authentic experience about the professionals. From here, YDSs can confidently recommend professional mental health support to the young adults and be more confident that emotional needs of the client are being addressed appropriately. The mental health professionals could advocate for and provide wholesome emotional support to individuals, which will overall lead to the success of the individual in their reentry process

With connections to quality mental health professionals established, maintaining an atmosphere that validates mental health issues and emphasizes the importance of seeking within the Reentry Program office is important. Since all of the interviewees are already enrolled in the Reentry Program yet still are not acknowledging the legitimacy of their emotional state, this shows that the Reentry Program is not sufficiently addressing the topic. To address this, implementation of various workshops that are centered on mental health may improve the current environment. OPP could bring in individuals from the Hartford community who specialize in workshops that discuss mental health and its relevancy to the reentry process. Further, each YDS should work toward creating a more supportive relationship with each individual in the Reentry Program. Although each YDS already emphasizes the importance of getting to know the individuals enrolled through their employee training processes, placing a stronger emphasis on emotions may be a small step toward creating a stronger connection between the YDS and individual. With a stronger connection, individuals may become more open about their emotional state. This could be done by addressing emotions through basic conversations about the young adults' lives outside of the Reentry Program. By making an effort

to establish stronger connections with each individual, the young adults may become more likely to confine in the YDS.

Housing

Stable housing is a critical component of the reentry process. Currently, the OPP Reentry employees are required to refer young adults in need of housing to the 211 Connecticut helpline, which is run through the United Way. 211 Connecticut allows individuals to search for resources in the area via telephone or the 211 Connecticut website. The 211 Connecticut helpline is intended to provide detailed information about all local shelters and housing related organizations.

Not having a stable living situation when reentering into society may cause individuals to become exposed to stressors and negative influences. Negative influences may involve friends who are involved in criminal behavior such as drug use and gang related activities on the streets. Five of the young adults interviewed did not return to the same home they were in prior to incarceration. The five young men who did not return to the same home expressed that they did not do so because they, in some way, felt that they were not welcome at the previous home. One individual declared that he “went from one bad place to an even worse place,” while another mentioned that he didn’t receive housing support because “I just f’ed up so much that they [family] see me doing good and they’re just like ‘yeah, its just a matter of time before you give up on yourself.’” Although five of the seven young men said they did not return to the same home they were in prior to incarceration, four of those five noted that they would have turned to their family members if they needed of housing.

Recommendations

Although having a family to rely on for housing is beneficial, it may not be the most stable resource for the young adults. For example, one individual noted that there is continual tension in his household due to the lack of communication between himself and his mother. When a need for housing may emerge, whether due to a financial situation or conflict within the household, it is important that the young adults have a readily available resource to turn to for assistance.

Although the 211 Connecticut helpline is beneficial in that it connects individuals with details about local shelters and housing organizations, there is a need for a better process. As discussed by the Reentry Program Director through an email correspondence, the 211 connection is extremely time consuming and often does not help the individual who calls. In order to enter a shelter, there must be a face-to-face interview with the individual and the shelter representative to assess the needs of the individual. Although this does not appear to be a significant obligation, the Reentry Program Director discussed that when the young adults call 211, they are put on hold for forty-five minutes, and once they finally do speak with a representative, they are often told that an appointment for face to face interviews could be anywhere from a day to several weeks.

It is clear that the housing assistance program that Reentry Program employees refer the young men to is not capable of meeting the immediate needs of the individuals. A resource book with information of local shelters can be beneficial. This resource book should be updated daily with the openings of various shelters in the community. Further, this resource book should contain only those shelters that are a suitable match for the young adult ex-offenders. It will be a time consuming task to call the various shelters each day to update the resource book. However, this could become a task for an intern of the Reentry Program. Even if the young adults are

awaiting an interview with a 211 representative, this resource book will provide them with options for the time being.

Education

The Reentry Program's focus on education and the attainment of high school diplomas is a primary function of the program. Many of the young adults who enroll in the Reentry Program were incarcerated before they were able to earn their high school diplomas. Having a high school diploma is an important factor in the success of a young adult while they are transitioning back into society. A high school diploma will provide greater job opportunities for the young adults, as well as improve their self-esteem.

The current structure of the computer based high school diploma program combined with the support of each YDS is proving successful according to the young adults interviewed. All seven of the young adults interviewed said that they felt comfortable asking an OPP Reentry employee for assistance and tutoring if they were struggling with their course work. Further, five of the seven young adults said that if they wanted to continue their education in some way after attaining their high school diploma, they would ask OPP employees for assistance.

Recommendations

Based on the information obtained through the questions regarding education, it appears that the Reentry Program is currently excelling at this component of the reentry process. The young adults interviewed feel comfortable reaching out to Reentry Program employees for help where needed. Individuals appear to be satisfied with the functioning of the educational program and the ability to obtain a high school diploma through the Reentry Program. Therefore, there are

no recommendations that need to be made to improve or restructure this component of the Reentry Program. The OPP Reentry Program should continue to carry out the educational component of the program through the same process it is currently doing.

Employment

Employment is an essential factor of a successful reentry into society after incarceration. Employment provides stability, structure, money, and a sense of productivity for individuals. However, obtaining employment is challenging for the reentry population. Although Connecticut does have the Ban the Box law, which prohibits employers from asking any criminal record related questions in the application, the individuals may still be faced with complications once interviewing begins. OPP as an organization is focused on creating economically independent adults, and the Reentry Program is one component of this. The Reentry Program's workforce development activities prepare the young adults for the employment process, beginning with the job hunt, and following through to successful job placement, and the maintaining of these jobs.

When asked where one would go to for help if they were struggling to find employment, four of the seven young adults did not include OPP or Reentry Program employees in their response. Three individuals said that they did not know where they would go for help, and one mentioned nobody, because everybody has given up on him. Further, this individual mentioned "I've asked a bunch of people and they act like they would help you, but they don't want to...they're just not really concerned because like, as long as they're doing good, I feel like they don't worry about me." Another individual who said he did not know where he would access help with employment said he maybe would try to search for jobs on the Internet.

Recommendations

Although employment is a primary focus of OPP, the interviews emphasize that the Reentry Program is not fully addressing all the challenges. Of the three individuals who said they would turn to OPP and Reentry Program employees for employment assistance, one thoroughly discussed how helpful the KUDER assessment was. The KUDER assessment is online based. It asks a series of questions to individuals, and comes up with possible career paths that would fit this individual's personality and capabilities. Further, the assessment will explain what qualifications are needed to obtain the various jobs. The individual who mentioned this online tool said "its kinda one of them things that you can read between the lines and get no information from, or you can actually read it, do your work, and then learn something from it." The other individuals who said they do not know where they would go for employment assistance may be considered those who "read between the lines." Although each YDS already does discuss the results of the assessment with the young adult, it is clear that the individuals are failing to see the benefit of it. Therefore, a more thorough analysis of the assessment, completed with individuals and their YDS may be beneficial. For example, after discussing the results of the assessment, the YDS could sit with the individuals and discuss the qualifications needed, and create a list of goals that the individuals will have to achieve in order to obtain the qualifications. Consistent follow up and discussion of these goals and the progress made by the individual will also be important.

Bringing employment representatives into the Reentry Program office may be beneficial to the individuals who are struggling to find employment. Since many career fairs include several jobs that are not obtainable for ex-offenders, bringing prescreened employers who hire ex-offenders into the office may help individuals to feel less overwhelmed. Further, individuals

may be exposed to job opportunities that they had not thought about prior to meeting a representative of the company. Although it may be challenging to make the initial connection with employers, once relationships with employers in the area are established, OPP's Reentry Program will become better known in the community.

Referring the young adults to other community resources to help with employment will also help. The Hartford Public Library has the American Job Center. The American Job Center has several "career coaches" who can assist the young adults with their job searching. The career coaches specialize in the following: resumes, interviews, finding jobs online, and creating email addresses. Although the career coaches do not specialize in working with the reentry population, connecting the young adults with them will establish a resource for the young adults, outside of the Reentry Program office. This will promote networking for the young adults, and lead them to more opportunities than they may be getting with just the Reentry Program.

Financial

The employment challenges that this population encounters correlate with the financial capabilities of the population. Maintaining a healthy relationship with finances is important for the young adult reentry population. Lack of financial literacy may leave the individuals vulnerable, relying on negative pressures for financial guidance. The OPP Reentry Program hosts financial literacy workshops that individuals enrolled in the Reentry Program are encouraged to attend. Often, employees of various financial institutions will host the workshops at the Reentry Program office. The workshops are intended to increase financial literacy skills and educate the young adults on the components of finances (e.g., saving money, budgeting,

credit cards, debt). This is achieved through activities and games that reflect real life financial situations.

Although the Reentry Program hosts financial literacy workshops, none of the seven interviewees noted that they would turn to the Reentry Program employees for financial guidance. Five of the seven mentioned that they would turn to various family members for financial guidance. Highlighting the lack of financial literacy among this group, one young man mentioned “well, I have a cousin that does all that saving and stuff,” and another said, “that budgeting process is a process that I’m still like having troubles like dealing with.”

Although relying on family members for financial guidance and advice can provide individuals with some support, in most cases it is minimal.

Recommendations

It is evident that the Reentry Program’s current strategies for addressing the financial literacy of the young adults are not effective. Currently, attendance at the financial workshops is voluntary and there is a lack of participation. Making these workshops a required part of the Reentry Program may be the impetus to the young adults need. Those who are attending the workshops are doing so because they are actively aware that they need support in regards to financial literacy. Those who are not attending likely also need this support, but they are just not aware of that they need to build their financial literacy skills. Therefore, requiring the individuals to attend the financial literacy workshops will considerably improve the financial component of the reentry process.

Not only is there a lack of participation, but also there is a lack of effective strategy within the workshops that is preventing those who do participate from wanting to return to future

workshops. Restructuring the functioning of the financial workshops may promote better outcomes. While bank employees have an extensive knowledge of financial literacy, their delivery of this knowledge to the individuals in the Reentry Program may not be straightforward and easy to understand. Rather than having the bank representatives provide one workshop that embodies several components of financial literacy, several workshops over a set period of time may be more suitable for the population. For example, each week a workshop could be set up that discusses a different component of financial literacy (e.g., saving one week and credit the next). This strategy will allow the material to be delivered in a more understandable manner. Further, by having multiple sessions, the individuals attending the workshops will establish a relationship with the financial representative. This relationship will provide the young adults with someone they can turn to when they need guidance on their finances.

Final Remarks by Interviewees

The Reentry Program's focus on assisting with the transition process of young adults reentering is multidimensional, focusing on several factors of the process. Although the Reentry Program's work is helping this population in some ways (namely in finishing their high school education), it is important to understand the structural issues that Hartford as a community faces that is posing challenges to the young adult reentry population. The final question asked in each interview was "if you could change one thing in Hartford that would make the reentry transition after incarceration less challenging, what would it be and why?" The answers highlight the many difficulties. Some responses show the lack of opportunity that the city has for the reentry population and how this lack of opportunity pressures the young adults into turning to criminal behavior as means of survival. For example, one individual noted "if everyone had a job in

Hartford, it wouldn't be so bad out here... when you grow up in the streets, the only reason why you do any of that stuff is because of money...since I came out, there's been ten people dying in the past two months. Everyone's getting killed..." Further discussing the lack of opportunity and the violence it has brought to the city, another young man noted: "there's too much violence out here. Too much violence...take all the guns off the streets and drugs and all that." Additionally, one individual discussed how the negative relationship that the police have with the young adults of Hartford is further perpetuating the violence and lack of opportunity.

The structural level problems that Hartford experiences provide an understanding of how complex the reentry process is. Programs such as the OPP Reentry Program are extraordinarily important because they provide opportunity to young adults upon their release from incarceration, opportunities that would not have existed without the program. The Reentry Program is changing the lives of many young adults in Hartford, and reducing recidivism for these individuals. However, there are still considerable challenges that individuals must address years after completion of the Reentry Program. These challenges include the violence and poverty that is found in the Hartford neighborhoods that many of the individuals reside in. The Reentry Program provides the tools the individuals need to overcome these adversities, but the structural barriers in Hartford, and similar urban areas around the country, are pertinent. By addressing the structural forces through advocating, awareness will be brought to these issues.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

This analysis has addressed the quality of the current community support system for young adults enrolled in Our Piece of the Pie's Reentry Program. The analysis has indicated how the Reentry Program is succeeding and provided recommendations for improvement. The

analysis was based on interviews with seven males. However, it would have been beneficial to have had input from female identifying individuals enrolled in the Reentry Program as well. Further, some participants were not willing to fully answer the questions, so some interviews could not be used for the analysis. A larger sample of young adults to interview may have compensated for this.

Future research should focus on the quality of support systems within prison facilities, before individuals are released. Components of the in prison support systems may be educational programs, workforce development programs, and mental health services. Reentry programs could use this research to adapt their services so that they are as relevant as possible for the young adults upon their release.

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Appendix A

Interview Prompts

In general, what do you think the hardest challenges are for young adults reentering into society after incarceration?

Family Support

- Did you return to the home you were in prior to incarceration?
 - If yes, who lives here?
 - If not, where did you go?
- Do you have family in the area?
 - If yes
 - Did you feel as though your family was supportive in your return?
 - If yes, did they support you:
 - Financially?
 - Educationally?
 - In regards to employment?
 - Emotionally?
 - If no, in what ways did they not support you?
 - What do you think could have made this transition better for you and your family?

Community Support

Health

- Do you feel as though you have a strong support system, other than family members?
 - If you are overwhelmed, sad, and/or upset, whom do you look to for support?
 - Is this person a mental health provider?
 - If yes, are you comfortable speaking to this individual?
 - If yes, what makes you feel comfortable speaking to this individual?
 - If not, what makes you feel uncomfortable speaking to this individual?
 - If not, is there a reason you do not seek support from a mental health provider? For example, maybe you feel as though you do not need the professional support, or, you feel as though you will find better support from a friend who you feel you can better relate with.

Housing

- If you are in need of housing, do you know where to look for support or who to contact? (Such as a case worker or a shelter)
 - If yes, where would you look/who would you contact? Do not provide actual names, just association with this person.
 - If not, for what reasons do you think that you don't know whom to contact?

Money/Paying Bills

- If you are in need of financial guidance, do you know where to look for support or who to contact? In other words, if you are having trouble paying your bills or managing money, is there anywhere/anyone you could contact for help? (Such as a case worker)
 - If yes, where and who? Do not provide actual names, just who this person is to you.
 - If not, for what reasons do you think that you don't know whom to contact?

Employment

- If you are struggling with finding employment, do you know where to look for support or who to contact? (For example, OPP workers)
 - If yes, where and who? Do not provide actual names, just who this person is to you.
 - If not, for what reasons do you think that you don't know whom to contact?

Education

- If you are looking to further your education after receiving your high school diploma through OPP, do you know where to look for support or who to contact?
 - If yes, where or who? Do not provide actual names, just who this person is to you.
 - If not, for what reasons do you think that you don't know whom to contact?

- If you are having a hard time with your schoolwork and grades, do you have anyone you feel comfortable with asking for help? (Such as an OPP worker or tutor)
 - If yes, where or who? Do not provide actual names, just who this person is to you.
 - If not, for what reasons do you think that you don't know whom to contact?

If you could change one thing about Hartford that would make the reentry transition after incarceration less challenging, what would it be and why?