

YOUTH RE-ENTERING LANCASTER COUNTY AFTER COMMITMENT TO A STATE YOUTH REHABILITATION CENTER



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INTRODUCTION

The number of individuals in prisons and jails is at an all-time high, and the vast majority will be released back into their communities at some point. An estimated five million individuals were on probation or parole at the end of 2010, and each of these individuals will face a number of issues and obstacles upon their return. Often they lack services and the support necessary to succeed. In April 2008, Congress signed into law The Second Chance Act (SCA), in order to address the lack of support and services for individuals re-entering our communities.

Lancaster County, Nebraska received a planning grant to address the number of juveniles re-entering the community. From October 2011 to September 2012, Lancaster County developed a Reentry Team and set out to establish a baseline of the needs for youth re-entering the community after placement at one of the state's Rehabilitation Treatment Centers (Kearney or Geneva), to determine gaps in services. They also hoped to establish baseline recidivism rates.

DATA QUALITY AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

To assist the Reentry Team with this process, the Juvenile Justice Institute (JJI) reviewed 150 electronic records of youth from Lancaster County who were discharged from either YRTC Geneva (75 youth) or YRTC Kearney (75 youth). JJI also examined hardcopy files from 25 of the youth placed at Geneva. To establish a baseline, researchers examined four key research questions:

1. What are youth's needs as they re-enter Lancaster County? (as indicated by the Youth Level Services/ Case Management Inventory and review of files);
2. How well do we prepare youth and families for the youth's return (as indicated by family team meetings); and
3. How often do youth recidivate, indicated by the number of times a youth returned to the YRTC facility.
4. How effectively do we work as a community to ensure that re-entry services are available for youth returning to our community (using a collective impact philosophy)?

MEASUREMENT TOOLS

In Nebraska, system-involved youth are often assessed using the Youth Level Services/ Case Management Inventory. The YLS is derived from the Level of Service Inventory Revised (LSI-R), a standardized risk assessment for adult offenders created by Andrews and Bonta (Thompson & Pope, 2005; Bechtel, Lowenkamp & Latessa, 2007). There are a handful of studies that demonstrate the predictive validity of the YLS/CMI. Bechtel, Lowenkamp and Latessa (2007) examined the relationship between recidivism and YLS/CMI scores by assessing 4,482 cases where juveniles were serving both community-based and institutional sentences. They chose these divergent settings to determine whether the tool was truly effective in identifying different risk levels. Their findings indicate that the YLS/CMI is effective at predicting juvenile recidivism for youth in both community settings and institutional settings. For most of the 150 youth, JJI was able to examine YLS/CMI scores at two points of time:

- The first YLS on record was selected because it reflects the youth's needs as he or she entered the system.
- The YLS score at exit, generally sixty days after release from the YRTC.

Family Team Meetings

The analysis of Family Team Meetings included a smaller random selection of twenty-five files. JJI examined the notes that case workers enter into the Family Team Meetings section of NFOCUS. Researchers then utilized qualitative software that facilitated content analysis. Family team meeting documentation ranged from 2 to 31 pages per file. Within the files, JJI coded 691 individual codes in 44 code categories. We were specifically looking for the regularity of the meetings held, the persons present and the subjects discussed, so that we could analyze if the family team meetings helped prepare the youth for reentry.

Recidivism

Data for our examination of recidivism was provided by the YRTC facilities and included a count of youth who had been recommitted to YRTC after the initial release.

Collective Impact

Collective impact refers to the "commitment of a group of important actors from different sectors to a common agenda for solving a specific social problem (Kania and Kramer 2011). To assess Lancaster County's capacity to develop a common agenda for youth re-entering our community, we tracked attendance patterns and five elements present in groups that operate using collective impact. The key components of effective collective impact include: a common agenda, shared measurement systems, mutually reinforcing activities, continuous communication, and backbone support organizations (Kania and Kramer 2011).

ASSESSING NEED BASED ON YLS SCORES

On average, Lancaster County youth re-entering the community had the YLS assessment conducted 4 separate times during their juvenile justice system involvement. Of the 150 youth we examined, their first YLS assessment was done at an average age of 15.5 (ages ranged from 12 to 19). The average aggregate YLS score was 20.1 with a range from 2 to 35. (Higher scores indicate higher levels of need and risk.)

Youth showed the greatest need in four domains:

- Education and Employment Needs ($m=3.7$)
- Personality and Behavior ($m=3.6$)
- Family Circumstances and Parenting ($m=3.4$)
- Peer Relations ($m=3.1$)

Although there were some differences in mean scores across gender, there were only two domains where males and females demonstrated significantly different YLS scores.

- Young women released from Geneva demonstrated a higher level of need in leisure and recreation ($p<.05$) at the time they were assessed.
- Young men released from Kearney demonstrated a higher level of need in the area of education and employment ($p<.05$) at the time they were assessed.

Table 1: Average YLS Scores By Gender and Domain

	Family Circumstance	Education & Emp.	Peer Relations	Substance Abuse	Leisure & Rec	Personality & Behavior	Attitude & Orientation
Males	3.2	3.9	3.0	1.9	1.8	3.8	2.2
Females	3.6	3.4	3.2	1.7	2.1	3.4	2.1

ASSESSING NEED BASED ON CPS HISTORY

We also examined the families' contacts with Nebraska Health and Human Services' Child Protective Services (CPS), and court involvement, to assess a families' potential need for services. The families and youth involved in this sample had multiple contacts with the system, and most could be defined as "Cross-over Youth¹." Of the 150 youth in this sample, 131 youth (87.3%) had a history of CPS contact as a victim of abuse and/or neglect. On average, youth had 5.34 CPS calls prior to entry into YRTC (calls related to that specific child). When we examined CPS contact by family (and did not limit it to the specific child placed at the YRTC), families (of youth in this sample) had a mean of 7.85 contacts with CPS.

Children that are a part of the child welfare system have a higher likelihood of becoming a juvenile delinquent (Herz, Lee, Lutz, Stewart, Tuell, Wiig, Bilchik, and Kelly, 2102). This is especially the case when the child welfare involvement continues into young adulthood. The average age of the first contact with CPS for youth re-entering after YRTC was 13.2 years old and ranged from 5 to 18.7 years of age.

Recent studies show that persistent maltreatment extending from infancy to adulthood and maltreatment during adolescence are significantly correlated with increased risk of juvenile delinquency and criminality (Thornberry, 2008). Many maltreated youth cross over from the child welfare system into the juvenile justice and other systems of care. Child abuse and neglect increase the risk of any arrest of a juvenile by 55 percent and the risk of committing a violent crime by 96 percent (Widom, 1989).

ASSESSING STABILITY BASED ON PLACEMENTS

Vulnerable young people face even greater obstacles to success when they are involved in more than one system of care (Altschuler, Stangler, Berkley and Burton, 2009). The majority of youth in this sample experienced numerous placements in their lifetimes, making them even more vulnerable. The total number of placements a youth had experienced ranged from 1 to 41 (per individual child), with an average of 11.3 per child.

Again, there were significant differences between males and females, with young women having the higher average number of out of home placements: females had an average of 12.2 placements while men had an average of 10.3 placements. Additional research should be done to determine whether there are gender differences in pre-YRTC placement.

¹ Research has demonstrated that juveniles who experience abuse and neglect often cross over into delinquent behavior. The Center for Juvenile Justice Reform (CJJR) has developed a practice model that recommends particular principles to reduce the number of youth who crossover between the child welfare and juvenile justice systems.

ASSESSING CURRENT REENTRY POLICY

The current Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services Reentry Policy has many evidence based practice (EBP) elements designed to facilitate successful reentry. For instance, family team meetings should occur monthly with the youth's support group to discuss the youth's transition back to the community. The document has a clear definition of a family team meeting:

- The people present should always include the youth, family, informal and formal supports, and JSO/FPS.
- Discussions should include placement for the youth after the facility.
- Any changes in these plans should be discussed with the youth and other members of the team. The JSO/FPS should discuss progress and needs of the youth and should help the youth follow their individual treatment plan to help with their transitioning. This individualized treatment plan should be discussed at the meetings as well.
- If pre-placement furlough is available, the youth is expected to re-enroll in school, apply for employment, set up treatment, and get acquainted with the reentry placement setting. A checklist is given to the youth when they are on furlough that they must complete. According to the policy it is unclear as to what this checklist includes.

Deficits within the DHHS Policy include a lack of assigning responsibility and specific guidance. For instance, if a youth is given a list of expectations (services to be set up either on furlough or at reentry) there is no indication of who is responsible for arranging the services or if the youth receives any assistance. Similarly, there is no listing of services or resources available in the community.

ASSESSING FREQUENCY OF FAMILY TEAM MEETINGS

To see whether family team meetings met each of the elements, we examined the content of 25 files. First, we examined how often family team meetings occurred.

- Only two of the 25 files reviewed had documentation of transition planning discussions during the monthly meetings (8% of files reviewed).
- Few meetings met the definition of a family team meeting (as defined by DHHS Policy). Only 7 of the 75 (9.3%) of the youth discharged from Kearney had meetings that met the definition, and only 5 of the 75 youth (6.6%) of the youth from Geneva. One reason for this may be because the policy appears fairly new. It also may be a definitional issue.

Table 2 (on the next page) indicates the team meetings that the YRTC classified as a family team meeting.

Facility	Total # of FTM's	# Total Youth
Kearney	8	7
Geneva	8	5

The differences in definition became clear when the Institute counted narratives labeled "Family Team Meetings" in NFOCUS. Table 3 illustrates the number of meetings caseworkers labeled as family team meetings. Part of the reason for the disparity is that meetings that occurred before DHHS policy was enacted do not qualify under the current DHHS definition. Another aspect involves timing – many family team meetings documented in table 3 occurred after the youth was released.

Facility	FTM's BEFORE YRTC	FTM's AFTER YRTC	Total FTM's	# Total Youth
Kearney	217	282	499	70
Geneva	337	291	628	67
Total	554	573	1127	137

ASSESSING CONTENT OF FAMILY TEAM MEETINGS

Unfortunately, some of the narratives labeled as a family team meeting lacked content that we would anticipate in a reentry planning meeting. One clear example of this is when a youth is neither present nor discussed during the meeting. Although it is appropriate to discuss a sibling or parent's progress during the family team meeting, this should be in the context of the youth's release. In 32% of the files reviewed, (8 of the 25), the team meeting was a combined family team meeting with siblings involved in some of meetings.

We also coded transition discussions following the DHHS Policy as a guideline for desired topics (placement, education, needs, furlough, etc.), and found the following:

- **Timing:** In some cases the planning process did not begin until shortly before the youth's release from the YRTC.
- **Participation:** In 53 different meetings (21 of the 25 files), it was clear that critical participants (like the youth or a parent) were not present.

- Placement: Often the team discussed problems the youth was having within the facility or at the placement after YRTC.
- Education: This area was addressed with regularity, and fell into two categories:
 - i. the youth's education while in facility,
 - ii. transition planning for returning to the community,
- Employment Needs. Individual youth almost never had a specific plan for employment. Documented meetings generally occurred *after the youth had already returned to the community.*

Despite limitations, some files had good examples of reentry planning and discussion: 18 of the 25 files, or 72%, contained at least some team discussion of the youth's reentry and specific transition planning prior to release. In 28% of the files, there was little evidence of transition planning for the youth.

LIMITATION OF CODING NFOCUS DOCUMENTATION

Clearly our analysis of the data and the narratives is only as good as the case worker's data entry into the state's system (NFOCUS). It was very clear that some caseworkers document better than others. But it may also be that those caseworkers hold family team meetings that adhere to DHHS policy AND document better. We saw certain patterns of repetition, like the same statement repeated multiple times: "Johnny will need to enroll in school when he returns to Lincoln." It might be that the case worker had more in depth discussion about Johnny's education and simply did not document it well.

RECIDIVISM

One final element of the baseline that Lancaster County sought to establish was a recidivism baseline. The Reentry Team defined recidivism as "a return to secure confinement with either a new adjudication/conviction or as the result of a violation of the terms of supervision within 12 months of initial release."²

"Secure Confinement" was defined as a "return to one of the Youth Rehabilitation Treatment Centers (Kearney or Geneva), or an adult facility, for a new conviction. "Violation of terms of supervision" includes revocation or violation due to a new law violation, or as the result of a technical violation (miss curfew, truant from school, and fail to report, on run).

² Recidivism has since been re-defined as a "Conviction or adjudication of a misdemeanor II or above in adult court, subdivision 1 or above in juvenile court within one year of successful release from supervision. (Release from supervision is the date that they receive their successful release letter).

The group discussed the use of detention to stabilize youth and prevent them from being officially recommitted or committing a new law violation. For planning purposes (and to assess utilization of resources), data was gathered on youth in this sample who were booked into juvenile detention.

DATA QUALITY AND AVAILABILITY

Data on youth released and readmitted to YRTC Geneva and YRTC Kearney were reported by each of the facilities. Lancaster County Juvenile Detention Center staff provided a list of all youth admitted to their facility between 2007 and 2012.

READMISSIONS TO A YOUTH REHABILITATION FACILITY

Of the 150 youth released from a Youth Rehabilitation Center, 61 youth or 40.7% were subsequently readmitted to the same facility. Of the youth who are recommitted, many (41%) are recommitted within the first year after being released (25 of the 61 total). When examined by gender and facility, we found that only 10.7% of the young women (8 of the 75 released) were recommitted to the facility. When a young woman is recommitted within the first year of release, on average it occurs at six month post release (151 days). Of the 75 most recently released young women, all of the commitments (8) were for a new law violation.

Young men demonstrated a different pattern: 29.3% of the young men released from Kearney end up recommitted to the facility (22 of the 75 released). Roughly 91% of young men who are recommitted are sent back within the first year (compared to 63% of young women). Of the young men who are recommitted, the average number of days from release to recommitment is 229 days. Technical violations were the most common reason that young men were recommitted to YRTC Kearney, explaining 77.3% of commitments (Table 4 and Table 5).

Table 4: Youth Recommitted By Facility

Facility	Total # of Youth Readmitted	# Total Youth Released	Total # of Youth Readmitted w/i first year	New Law Violation	Technical
Kearney	22 (29.3%)	75	20	5 (22.7%)	17 (77.3%)
Geneva	8 (10.7%)	75	5	8 (100%)	0

Table 5: Technical Violations Cited as reason to Recommit to Kearney
Possession of Drugs
Auto Theft
Assault/Parole Violator
Disturbing the Peace
Auto Theft/Parole Violator
Possession of Drugs/Parole Violator
Possession of Drug Paraphernalia/Parole Violator
Criminal Mischief
Assault/Sherman County
Possession of Drugs/Parole Violator
Vandalism/Parole Violator
Criminal Mischief/Parole Violator
Assault
Burglary/Parole Violator
Possession of Drugs/Parole Violator
Criminal Mischief

YOUTH BOOKED INTO JUVENILE DETENTION

From July 2007 to May 2012, youth in this sample (150 youth) were booked into the Lancaster County Juvenile Detention 120 times. Eighty-eight occurred within the first year of release, 24 in the second year, and 8 in the third year post release. The average length of stay for the youth first placement (post YRTC) was 4.23 days. Subsequent average lengths decline sharply, at .93 and then .55 average length of stay for the 150 youth in this sample. The Reentry Team discussed the use of local detention facilities as a means of stabilizing youth –over a period of days – to prevent serious behaviors that could potentially return the youth to the state facility. Future reentry discussion should address the use of detention, explore non-secure detention and determine whether there are other means of stabilizing youth in the community. The economic ramifications and reallocation of funds should also be discussed at that time.

COLLECTIVE IMPACT AND SHARED AGENDA

For a community to make significant reform to its juvenile justice system, a group of committed and influential leaders must come together and share a common vision or agenda. Too often juvenile justice providers operate in a world of “isolated impact” (Kania and Kramer 2011). That is, we work in silos and impact only the small group of people directly around us. This environment is a reality in a world of decreasing budgets, but is not the most efficient way to serve youth or create

change. Collective impact refers to the “commitment of a group of important actors from different sectors to a common agenda for solving a specific social problem (Kania and Kramer 2011). To assess Lancaster County’s capacity to develop a common agenda for youth reentering our community, we measured the key components of effective collective impact. These include: a common agenda, shared measurement systems, mutually reinforcing activities, continuous communication, and backbone support organizations. Lancaster County served as the backbone support agency, completing all necessary grant reports and payments and provided a consistent, neutral, and comfortable meeting site. Similarly, a private consultant arranged consistent meetings and established continuous communication with the Reentry Team. These elements of collective impact were straight-forward and easy to measure and provided an excellent base for the group to work from.

The remaining three elements (a common agenda, shared measurement systems, and mutually reinforcing activities) were more difficult to measure. Professionals may tacitly agree in meeting, but not really see eye-to-eye or share a common vision with the group. Consequently, we analyzed whether the group had a common agenda by examining attendance at meetings. As a general rule, individuals will limit interactions or not participate fully if they do not agree with or internalize the goals (Smith, D., Heckmeyer, C. Kratt, P., and Mason D., 1997).

A total of 8 Reentry specific meetings took place from November 2011 to August 2012. The first meeting, held in October 2011, was not included in our evaluation because it was an introductory meeting on the reentry project. Meetings were not held in January 2012 (due to conflicting schedule with legislature) and May 2012 (due to the planning conference in Washington D.C.).

Table 6: Meeting Attendance of Key Stakeholders		
Agency	Meetings Attended	%
HUB	8	100%
YRTC-K	8	100%
JJI	8	100%
YRTC-G	7	87.5%
OJS	7	87.5%
DHHS	7	87.5%
Lancaster County	7	87.5%
Detention	7	87.5%
Probation	6	75%
Department of Education	6	75%
Project Everlast	4	50%
LPS	4	50%
KVC	2	25%
Families Inspiring Families	1	12.5%

Overall, key professional agencies were involved and the project moved forward after the legislative session ended. Table 6 demonstrates attendance patterns from key agencies over planning grants' time frame.

Attendance patterns demonstrate an overall commitment to a shared agenda. Agencies representing the youth "voice" had more difficulty attending meetings, likely due to the times meetings are scheduled (rather than a lack of consensus with the group). Future efforts work may want to examine other methods (emails, surveys) for including the youth perspective.

Political stress also influenced attendance. For example, in 2012, the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) underwent dramatic changes in the privatization of child welfare and case management. Consequently, a handful of professionals that showed deep commitment early on, stopped attending meetings due to changes in the system. One of the key DHHS contacts changed jobs a few months into the process. She was critical in explaining the data collection process through NDEN and NFOCUS. She was very knowledgeable on field operations. Although other DHHS workers filled her place in upcoming meetings, there was a lack of consistency. Similarly, a key DHHS decision maker was unable to attend some meetings because her presence was needed in the legislature. One meeting was rescheduled, but others moved forward and were not as productive without a key decision maker.

Although the Reentry Team did not always reach consensus or agree to a shared measurement system, they agreed to keep working. In one of the final meetings of the Lancaster Reentry Pilot, the Reentry Team agreed to develop smaller workgroups to work through some of these issues and bring the consensus back to the larger group.

CONCLUDING REMARKS AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

The cohesion and dedication of the Reentry Team demonstrated an overall common agenda: for Lancaster County to better meet the needs of youth returning to their community, in order to prevent youth from deeper involvement in the juvenile or criminal justice system.

Four key recommendations will assist the Reentry Team in maintaining the momentum they have gathered over the past year:

1. Youth included in this sample had a high number of placements in their relatively short lifetimes. Every attempt to provide consistent community-based services that focus on the high need areas (Education and Employment Needs, Personality and Behavior, Family Circumstances and Parenting and Peer Relations) will help to stabilize the lives of the youth involved in the system.
2. Future work should find ways to incorporate the perspective of system-involved youth. If attendance at professional meetings is not feasible, -- email surveys, web conferencing, paper surveys or some other means should be incorporated.
3. Future team discussion should address the use of detention, and whether there are other means of stabilizing youth in the community, as well as the economic ramifications of this change.
4. Smaller workgroups across multiple agencies and stakeholders should be convened to continue work in each of the areas identified by the team. For example, data must be collected on critical variables like graduation rates, or GED attainment, employment, programming options, and recidivisms rates. This data will help inform future efforts toward a shared data system and will help identify where gaps in services exists.

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