

Emerging Adults: Considerations for Successful Reentry

Introduction

The United States has a long and complex history in determining which legal system approaches are best suited to hold young people accountable while also addressing their unique developmental needs. While laws have attempted to draw a distinct line where the juvenile justice system ends, and the adult criminal justice system begins, the growing body of evidence indicates that line is difficult to draw. In many states, young people 18 and over are held accountable for crimes in the adult criminal legal system. Yet, there is clear evidence that young people, between the ages of 18 and 25, are still going through rapid adolescent brain development phases.

Over the past 25 years, the number of youths incarcerated in the adult criminal legal system has dropped nearly 80% since 2000 (Nam-Sonenstein & Sawyer, 2025). While this is significant progress, the United States still incarcerates individuals at a higher rate than any other country in the world (Equal Justice Initiative, 2026). Of the adult criminal legal system incarcerated individuals, on any given day approximately 2,400 are youth or young adults (Nam-Sonenstein & Sawyer, 2025).

For these emerging adults, those in the arc of core adolescent development, reentry into their communities poses unique challenges and considerations for those supporting them.

Adolescent Development

The body of research on adolescent development has grown substantially in the last fifty years, highlighting how much different parts of the brain grow and develop during this stage of life. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services in their report, *Adolescent Development Explained*, identified five key areas of growth (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2018):

- Physical: hormonal changes and development
- Cognitive: changes in the way the brain functions
- Emotional: how adolescents process emotions and stress
- Social: changes in familial, social, and romantic relationships
- Morals and values: how adolescents regard their place in the world

The day-to-day impact of incarceration on adolescent development is significant. Youths' physical bodies are growing rapidly and require access to nutritious food, activity, and sleep, which are not always consistently available in a correctional setting. This is the most rapid time of cognitive development for youth. Their brains are developing executive functioning skills such as impulse control, time management, long-term thinking and decision-making. Incarceration interrupts their ability to learn these skills when so many decisions are removed from them. This is also a heightened time for learning relationship and conflict management skills which are difficult to learn in a carceral environment. Their peers in the community are attending school, participating in social clubs and activities, navigating family and romantic relationships, all of which are nearly non-existent on the inside. Finally, this is the time of life where youth are developing their sense of moral reasoning and world view. Incarceration has its own culture and hierarchy, where youth are often learning just how to do time and survive.



Considering Adolescent Development in Reentry Planning

Successful reentry begins from the moment a young adult is incarcerated. Regardless of how long their sentence is, engaging in education, groups, spiritual activities, and other pro-social opportunities will help provide structure and support cognitive and emotional growth. As young adults get closer to returning to the community, there are at least five core domains that must be addressed for successful transition (Youth.gov, n.d.).

Connect and Repair Family Support Systems

Regardless of age at release, there is a strong likelihood that a young person will need to live with a family member. Having a loved one incarcerated can be difficult for immediate and extended family. There can be strong emotions of guilt, shame, and broken trust. Restorative practices and family counseling are processes that can assist in healing broken relationships and preparing for a young person's return to a family home.

Identifying and Treating Substance Use

Addressing substance use, if applicable, is a critical piece to a reentry plan. Substances are often a contributing factor to the reason the young person was incarcerated. The stress of reentry could be a trigger for relapse, so establishing support and if necessary, a treatment plan is essential. Twelve-step programs, community-based treatment, and/or halfway houses can be beneficial programs and supports for young people addressing addiction.

Creating Pathways for Healthy Peer Relationships

Peers are one of the strongest influences on young people and their decision-making. Helping youth re-think their peer groups and finding more prosocial connections can be a significant challenge. Supporting youth through cognitive behavioral groups that help them have hard conversations with former peers, pro-social sober activities, athletic leagues, faith-based/spiritual groups can help young adults get connected to new positive peer groups.

Engaging in Education and/or Employment

Reentry plans should help young people map out their next best step for education and/or employment once they leave the institution. Many young people take the opportunity to obtain their high school diploma, GED, and higher education courses on the inside. However, even with these degrees, employment can be a challenge with a record. Work with community colleges or universities to help young people identify financial aid support and specific reentry programs. Help young people build on the skills, certificates, etc. that they may have earned inside. Many reentry programs are connected with employers who are willing to hire or provide apprenticeship programs for formerly incarcerated individuals.



Identifying and Treating Behavioral and Physical Health Needs

Preparing young adults to take care of their mental and physical health upon release is essential. While there are a lot of positive emotions about being released, young people face real barriers which can take a toll on mental health and trigger a relapse in behavior. Young people will also have to adjust to fixing their own meals, maintaining exercise routines, and healthy sleep patterns. Identifying positive mentors for time management and other life skills will assist young people in their reentry transition. Helping young people get enrolled or re-activated in Medicaid immediately upon release has been associated with reentry success and reduced recidivism. (Degnan, 2025)

Resource Highlight

One of the forerunners of research and strategies for the emerging adult population is the Columbia University Justice Lab: Emerging Adult Justice Project (EAJP). The premise for this project is based on, “data showing that emerging adults do particularly poorly in the adult criminal legal system (e.g., have the highest recidivism rates and most pronounced racial disparities of any age group), and recognition that the adult system does not provide the kinds of developmentally appropriate services, programs, or opportunities that support the healthy transition to adulthood” (Columbia University Justice Lab, 2022). The EAJP was created by emerging adults with lived experience, practitioners, researchers, policy makers, and advocates to develop a framework to guide jurisdictions on how to re-think their systems through an emerging adult, developmentally appropriate lens. To learn more about the framework, visit [[The Emerging Adult Justice Project](#)].



Conclusion

The growing body of research continues to support the premise that young people have better outcomes in juvenile court systems than adult court systems. Since their inception, juvenile courts aim to identify the causes of behavior and then necessary services to alter a youth's trajectory. The adult court system is not designed with young people in mind, which leads to youth being pushed deeper into the adult justice system. (Rovner, 2026) Recent efforts to account for adolescent development in reentry planning are a step toward progress, but broader policy changes are needed. Many states are considering policies that raise the age for juvenile courts to the early twenties, based on the adolescent development research. Justice professionals working in the criminal legal system would benefit from training on adolescent developmentally appropriate approaches to accountability and rehabilitation to help ensure better outcomes for these young adults. Finally, policies and practices grounded in evidence that reshape our current systems to hold young adults accountable and meet their developing needs should be the primary step forward.

Works Cited

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