

Stop the Revolving Door: Giving Communities and Youth the Tools to Overcome Recidivism

Recommendations on Juvenile Reentry in New York City

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A Project of the Center for Court Innovation

This is the executive summary of *Stop the Revolving Door: Giving Communities and Youth the Tools to Overcome Recidivism*. The full report is available at <http://www.courtinnovation.org>. It was written by the Youth Justice Board. Launched in January 2004, the Youth Justice Board is a team of young people from throughout New York City who study and propose solutions to public safety issues. The Youth Justice Board brings youth voices into the public debate on the topics — like juvenile justice and school safety — that most affect New York City teenagers.

The Youth Justice Board is a project of the Center for Court Innovation, a public-private partnership between the New York State Unified Court System and the Fund for the City of New York that works to improve public confidence in justice. Points of view and opinions in this document are the opinions of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the Center for Court Innovation.

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Executive Summary

This report presents the recommendations of the Youth Justice Board on juvenile reentry in New York City. Juvenile reentry refers to young people coming home to New York City neighborhoods after being in state custody for juvenile delinquency.

What is the Youth Justice Board?

Launched in January 2004 by the Center for Court Innovation, the Youth Justice Board brings together young people from throughout New York City to propose solutions to the public safety issues that affect them and their peers.

The goal of the Youth Justice Board is to provide a credible vehicle through which young people, ages 14 to 18, can have a voice in the debate about public safety policy in New York City. Members learn how policy is crafted in the real world. Who really makes the decisions that affect youth? Under what kinds of constraints (fiscal, legal, political, etc.) do decision-makers operate? What roles—both formal and informal—do community voices play in the process? These are the kinds of questions that the Youth Justice Board helps participants answer.

The sixteen Board members, drawn from high schools throughout the city, spent nine months researching the topic of juvenile reentry. They met with over two dozen city and state officials, youth workers, scholars, and even reentry youth and their family members. They spent months analyzing the data they collected, formulating policy recommendations and drafting a formal report. The Board has already presented their recommendations to the Chancellor of the New York City Department of Education, Commissioner of the New York State Office of Children and Family Services, Commissioner of the New York City Department of Youth and Community Development, Mayor's Criminal Justice Coordinator, and Association of the Bar for the City of New York.

Findings/Recommendations

The Youth Justice Board chose to focus on juvenile reentry because they were shocked to learn that 75% of all youth released from state custody are rearrested within three years. Based on their interviews and research, the Youth Justice Board identified three principles that should apply to the whole reentry process:

- **Early Planning**

Most juveniles who enter placement return to the same communities that they left.

Placement is an opportunity to prepare the young person—and the family—to address the challenges he or she will face when released. Therefore, planning for the return home should start early—as soon as the decision is made to send the young person to placement.

- **Individual Treatment**

The Youth Justice Board recommends that the key players involved with each young person meet early to create a plan that reflects his or her individual strengths and challenges. The team should include the young person, guardians, staff from the state agency responsible for placement and reentry (New York State Office of Children and Family Services, or OCFS), and a school representative.

- **Coordination**

Young people in placement and aftercare come into contact with many agencies (e.g. OCFS, the New York City Department of Education, and community-based service providers), but the Board heard from several agencies that they are in the dark about what other agencies were doing. Regular meetings of all the agencies working with reentry youth would help improve communication, ensuring that youth do not fall between the cracks.

Building on these principles, the Youth Justice Board recommends the following ideas to help prevent recidivism among reentry youth:

1. Motivate young people to succeed

Ultimately, reentry youth themselves are the only ones that can improve their lives. One of the reasons youth drop out of programs and get into trouble is that they are not involved in activities they enjoy. To help reentry youth stay motivated, the Board recommends linking youth to programs they can get excited about, offering job training and links to adult mentors, in particular.

2. Help young people get in school and stay in school

Although everyone interviewed agreed that education is crucial, it is hard to get reentry youth back in school and it is hard to get them to stay in school. One Department of Education official said that the biggest barrier is “the human hurdle—no one wants them back.” The Board recommends that OCFS make a higher priority of helping young people catch up in basic reading and math skills while in placement and provide an orientation workshop once they return home to prepare students for the return to their local school. In addition, the Department of Education should match students to schools quickly, make sure credits earned in placement are transferred correctly, and create incentives for schools to accept reentry students.

3. Strengthen the relationships between family and youth

One OCFS official said that if a young person is not accepted by his or her family, he or she will hang out in the streets. He emphasized that it was important to make sure that the family is ready for the young person’s return and bring the youngster up to speed on what has occurred back home. To help address these problems, the Board recommends counseling for the family and youth together, as well as voluntary parent-to-parent support groups. In addition, to maintain communication while the young person is in custody, OCFS should make sure families have an easy way to visit placement facilities in upstate New York.

4. Improve the reentry process

The Board recommends four specific ways to improve the current reentry process:

- Share assessment information.* OCFS collects a lot of information about the young person. Relevant information from these assessments should be available to the organizations that provide services to the young person.
- Track the early warning signs of recidivism.* Usually there are warning signs before a young person is rearrested: he or she becomes truant, violates curfew or doesn’t attend programs. OCFS should institute a uniform system to track these warning signs and intervene before the next arrest occurs.

- c. *Create Connection Centers.* The Board recommends creating a transition facility just north of New York City that would focus on helping young people make the difficult transition from placement to home. Since it is closer to home, OCFS aftercare workers, Department of Education staff, and parents could all meet to make sure the details of the reentry plan (e.g. school placement) are in place.
- d. *Create Welcome Centers.* Once they are back home, reentry youth need a place where they can go to get reliable information about services and opportunities. Welcome Centers in their communities would have links to youth development programs, mental health and substance abuse services, job training and peer support groups.

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