

# DOs AND DON'Ts FOR REDUCING RECIDIVISM AMONG YOUNG ADULTS IN THE JUSTICE SYSTEM

Young adults ages 18 to 24 are often considered the most challenging population under justice system supervision. Data show that they account for a disproportionately high percentage of arrests, particularly for violent crimes, and they are the most likely age group to reoffend.<sup>1</sup> In addition, young adults of color—particularly black and Hispanic young adults—are overrepresented in the justice system.<sup>2</sup> Recent scientific research has clearly demonstrated that young adulthood is a distinct period of development, with significant cognitive changes occurring into the mid-20s.<sup>3</sup> In response to this enhanced understanding of young adults' development, a growing number of jurisdictions have explored strategies to use resources more efficiently to improve outcomes for young adults in both the juvenile and adult criminal justice systems. These efforts have included expanding access to juvenile justice supervision and services for all or a subset of young adults; establishing specialized courts, correctional units, and supervision caseloads; and providing appropriate training to staff who work with young adults. While these innovations are noteworthy, there is limited research not only to inform targeted supervision and service strategies for this population, but also to confirm that such strategies are effective in improving outcomes and reducing persistent racial and ethnic disparities across the justice continuum.

Below is a list of dos and don'ts—informed by both research and practice—to guide state and local policy and practice changes focused on young adults in the justice system. This list draws on guidance gathered at a 2017 convening of researchers, policymakers, and practitioners that was cohosted by The Council of State Governments (CSG) Justice Center and Harvard Kennedy School's Program in Criminal Justice Policy and Management, with funding support from the William T. Grant Foundation and the Hyams Foundation. Policymakers and justice system leaders should use the strategies presented below as a starting point for advancing state and local system changes to reduce recidivism and improve other outcomes for young adults, such as those related to education and employment. To determine whether these strategies are having the intended effect and addressing racial and ethnic disparities, to inform course corrections along the way, and to increase the knowledge base for the field at large, states and localities are advised to collect data on young adult recidivism and other outcomes.

## DO use validated screening and assessment tools to guide supervision decisions and tailor programming to address young adults' distinct needs

- ✓ DO use validated screening and assessments to identify risk level and criminogenic and behavioral health needs for all young adults. Research suggests that screening and assessment tools validated for either youth or adults work equally well for young adults.
- ✓ DO use screening and assessment results to identify opportunities to divert young adults from the justice system and match them to supervision and programming based on risk level (e.g., focus the most intensive supervision and treatment resources on young adults most likely to reoffend).
- ✓ DO supplement existing assessment tools with specialized interview protocols to gather additional information relevant to young adults' transition to adulthood, including information on family and support networks as well as education and career goals.
- ✓ DO reassess young adults' risk level and criminogenic and behavioral health needs at least every six months to account for their ongoing development.

## DON'T treat young adults as a homogenous group or the same as youth or older adults

- ⊘ DON'T impose intensive supervision and programming on young adults who are assessed as having a low risk of reoffending. Research shows that the majority of these young adults will stop reoffending on their own as they mature into adulthood.
- ⊘ DON'T group young adults together with youth or older adults for programming, given their distinct developmental needs.

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## DO fund and provide research-based programs and treatment for young adults

- ✓ DO fund wraparound supports and locate programs together whenever possible, rather than referring young adults to several different service providers.
- ✓ DO provide young adults with cognitive behavioral programs that address criminal thinking and behaviors.
- ✓ DO match young adults with appropriate mental health and substance use treatment programs, as substance use peaks in young adulthood and many mental health conditions emerge for the first time during this period.
- ✓ DO establish a “career pathways” approach for young adults in both community and correctional settings to integrate workforce-readiness supports, post-secondary education and technical training, and supported employment opportunities that focus on earning a certification and are linked to the local labor market.

## DO foster sustained connections to prosocial peers and adults to strengthen engagement in programming

- ✓ DO fund and develop programming that focuses just as much on positive, sustained connections to peers and adults as it does on service delivery.
- ✓ DO offer adult and peer mentoring opportunities to provide young adults with practical and emotional guidance, support, and role modeling.
- ✓ DO provide specialized training that focuses on the distinct needs of young adults, such as training in young adult development, to all staff who work with this population.
- ✓ DO prepare supervision officers to help foster positive behavior changes in young adults by training them in motivational interviewing and other cognitive behavioral approaches.

## DON'T fund and refer young adults to narrowly focused programs

- ⊘ DON'T rely on stand-alone programs, such as employment, education, and independent living skills programs. These programs have been shown to produce—at best—limited short-term benefits because they do not address the full range of young adults' needs.
- ⊘ DON'T fund programs that are singularly focused on helping young adults obtain a GED or similar high school credential. Research has shown that the economic earnings of people who only obtain a GED or high school credential are similar to those who dropped out of high school, and that most young adults struggle to retain employment and advance in their careers without education, training, and support beyond a GED or high school credential.

## DON'T underestimate the importance of prosocial relationships

- ⊘ DON'T expect all young adults to have a strong network of family, friends, peers, or adult role models in place.
- ⊘ DON'T limit the responsibilities of supervision officers to surveillance and compliance.
- ⊘ DON'T hire and retain supervision officers that lack the interest, experience, and skill set to successfully engage with young adults in the justice system.

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## **DO hold young adults responsible for their behavior while also accounting for their ongoing growth and development**

- ✓ DO institute commonsense conditions of community supervision that allow for missteps as well as disruptions in young adults' living situations, program engagement, school, and work.
- ✓ DO establish a graduated system of responses to supervision violations that appropriately match the severity of young adults' behaviors.
- ✓ DO provide regular training for judges and court personnel on young adult development to help inform disposition and violation response decisions.

## **DO collaborate across service systems to minimize barriers to services and institutional supports for young adults**

- ✓ DO establish a jurisdiction-wide, cross-system task force to collaborate on minimizing eligibility requirements and policies and practices that impede access to education and employment, stable housing, and other supports for young adults.
- ✓ DO conduct an inventory of existing programs, policies, and funding streams that are directed toward young adults, and identify opportunities to address service gaps and use resources more efficiently.
- ✓ DO ensure flexible program schedules including evening and weekend hours, as well as stipends or financial incentives, to promote sustained program participation.
- ✓ DO address common barriers to program participation, including child care and transportation assistance.

## **DON'T expect progress toward program, treatment, or supervision completion to be consistent**

- ⊘ DON'T establish unnecessarily strict conditions of supervision or violation policies—such as mandatory daily attendance at a particular employment program—that are likely to set young adults up for failure and lead to deeper and more costly system involvement.
- ⊘ DON'T connect young adults to programs with rigid conditions for participation that prevent them from exiting and returning as needed, because they may not yet be ready to fully engage in programming.

## **DON'T create additional barriers to education, employment, health care, and housing for young adults**

- ⊘ DON'T limit young adults' access to public education and health care coverage by imposing rigid, age-based eligibility restrictions.
- ⊘ DON'T restrict young adults' eligibility for employment, college admission and financial aid, and housing solely based on their criminal history.

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## Additional Resources

For more information about strategies to improve outcomes for young adults in the justice system, see the following:

- The Council of State Governments Justice Center, *Reducing Recidivism and Improving Other Outcomes for Young Adults in the Juvenile and Adult Criminal Justice Systems* (New York: The Council of State Governments Justice Center, 2015), <https://csgjusticecenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Transitional-Age-Brief.pdf>.
- National Institute of Justice, *From Juvenile Delinquency to Young Adult Offending* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, 2014), <https://nij.gov/topics/crime/Pages/delinquency-to-adult-offending.aspx#age>.
- National Institute of Justice, *Programs and Legislation Targeting Justice-Involved Young Adults* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, 2016), <https://www.nij.gov/topics/crime/Pages/programs-and-legislation-targeting-justice-involved-young-adults.aspx>.
- Vincent Schiraldi, Bruce Western, and Kendra Bradner, "Community-Based Responses to Justice-Involved Young Adults," *New Thinking in Community Corrections Bulletin* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, 2015), NCJ 248900, <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/248900.pdf>.

## Notes

1. "Crime in the United States 2013," U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Criminal Justice Information Services Division, accessed August 30, 2017, [https://ucr.fbi.gov/crime-in-the-u.s/2013/crime-in-the-u.s.-2013/tables/table-41/table\\_41\\_arrests\\_persons\\_under\\_15\\_18\\_21\\_and\\_25\\_years\\_of\\_age\\_2013.xls](https://ucr.fbi.gov/crime-in-the-u.s/2013/crime-in-the-u.s.-2013/tables/table-41/table_41_arrests_persons_under_15_18_21_and_25_years_of_age_2013.xls); E. Ann Carson and Daniela Golinelli, *Prisoners in 2012: Trends in Admissions and Releases, 1991–2012* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2014).
2. Melissa Sickmund, T. J. Sladky, Wei Kang, and Charles Puzanchera, "Easy Access to the Census of of Juveniles in Residential Placement," Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, accessed September 19, 2017, <http://www.ojjdp.gov/ojstatbb/ezacjrp/>; Carson and Golinelli, *Prisoners in 2012*.
3. Kathryn Monahan, Laurence Steinberg, Elizabeth Cauffman, and Edward Mulvey, "Psychosocial Immaturity from Adolescence to Early Adulthood: Distinguishing Between Adolescence-Limited and Persistent Antisocial Behavior," *Development and Psychopathology* 25, no. 4 (November 2013): 1093–1105; Sara Johnson, Robert Blum, and Jay Giedd, "Adolescent Maturity and the Brain: The Promise and Pitfalls of Neuroscience Research in Adolescent Health Policy," *Journal of Adolescent Health* 45, no. 3 (September 2009) 216–221; Elizabeth Shulman, Kathryn Paige Harden, Jason Chein, and Laurence Steinberg, "The Development of Impulse Control and Sensation-Seeking in Adolescence: Independent or Interdependent Processes?" *Journal of Research on Adolescence* 26, no. 1 (March 2016): 37–44; Kerstin Konrad, Christine Firk, and Peter Uhlhaas, "Brain Development During Adolescence: Neuroscientific Insights into this Developmental Period," *Deutsches Arzteblatt* 110, no. 25 (June 2013): 425–431.

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