

# Smarter Use of Placement Can Improve Outcomes for Youth and Communities.

## SUMMARY

Because institutional placement is likely to remain in use, especially for serious or chronic offenders, juvenile justice systems need to understand its effects and how to use it to improve outcomes and reduce harm for young offenders and their communities. Three core changes could significantly improve the use of placement:

- To reduce harm, use placement only for cases where public safety is the main concern.
- To realize the benefits of institutional care, use effective, evidence-based programming and continually monitor and improve it.
- For best outcomes, improve the general environment of residential settings in specific ways.

Policymakers and practitioners need to understand how institutional placement can impede positive adolescent development. For most youth, the goals of reducing recidivism and promoting positive development are better met outside of placement, by evidence-based programs that combine close community supervision with focused programming, limit exposure to antisocial peers, involve parents, and promote positive community connections.

## Out-of-home placement is unlikely to disappear.

On any given day, around 70,000 adjudicated youth are in out-of-home placement,<sup>1</sup> the most restrictive and expensive option available to the court. Adolescents are placed in a range of residential settings, including foster and group homes, residential treatment centers, and state-run juvenile correctional facilities.<sup>2</sup>

Placement serves multiple purposes: it removes the offending youth from the community, thus reducing the opportunity for reoffending; serves as retribution; and can also provide opportunities for rehabilitation. These functions are all central to the mission of the juvenile court, especially where serious offenses are involved. For that reason—despite periodic discoveries of horrific institutional environments and evidence of limited impact on recidivism—institutional placement is likely to remain in use, particularly for serious or chronic offenders. It is therefore time to reexamine its role in juvenile justice.

## The juvenile justice system is rethinking how much it “needs” institutional placement.

The use of institutional placement has fluctuated in recent decades. In the 1980s and early 90s, an increase in juvenile crime and more punitive public attitudes and policies led to an upsurge

in placements; that trend continued even when juvenile crime rates began to decline in the late 1990s.<sup>3</sup> Since 1997, however, post-adjudication placements have declined, dropping 24 percent by 2009 and continuing currently.<sup>4</sup>

Two factors have fueled the decline. First, there are fewer young people coming in the front door of the system. Juvenile arrest rates have continued to decline since the mid-1990s,<sup>5</sup> and the use of community-based diversion has grown.<sup>6</sup> This means fewer youth are reaching the point where they might be sent to out-of-home placement.

Second, research has cast doubt on the benefits and necessity of institutional placement.

Recent, well controlled analyses indicate that resources spent on institutional care return little in the way of reduced offending. In one study, similar youth in two locales with different sanctioning practices—one used confinement regularly, in the other it was rare—showed similar rates of recidivism.<sup>7</sup> Another report—an analysis that examined outcomes for serious offenders in the Pathways to Desistance study—found no difference in re-arrest rates between adolescent offenders put on probation and those sent to placement.<sup>8</sup> Recent meta-analyses of interventions studies also show only a limited reduction in future offending following institutional placement.<sup>9</sup> The evidence for an impact on offending from institutional placement is just not there.

### **Institutional placement itself can harm positive adolescent development.**

If institutional placement is to play a role in juvenile justice, policymakers and practitioners

need to take a step back and view it in the framework of adolescent development. The fundamental questions here are: How might this experience harm an adolescent's development—especially in the influential spheres of peers, school, and family—and how can we instead use it to promote positive development?<sup>10</sup>

Unfortunately, current placement practices appear to do more to undermine than promote positive adolescent development. Placement entails disruptions that make positive adjustment more difficult, and may also provide new experiences that increase the likelihood of future criminality—at odds with the principle of “do no harm.”

**Peers.** One of the key developmental tasks of adolescence is learning to balance the influence of peers and family. Contrary to popular thought, peer relationships are more often positive than negative influences.<sup>11</sup> Out-of-home placement, however, can limit the positive effects, and instead expose youth to increased antisocial behavior, along with validation for it. Whether these “social contagion” effects<sup>12</sup> occur in institutional placements has not been definitively demonstrated,<sup>13</sup> but evidence from the Pathways study shows that time in institutional placement can expand an adolescent's criminal skills. Looking at placement the way one might assess a job training program, researchers found that adolescents made more money through illegal means after an institutional placement, indicating a possible increase in criminal skills through exposure to deviant peers.<sup>14</sup>

**School.** School is where adolescents develop and express academic competence and attain many

of the assets they need for a successful transition to young adulthood. Educational success is also related to higher income as an adult.<sup>15</sup> Frequent out-of-home placements disrupt the continuity and likely success of an educational career; learning is harder if you are always “catching up.” These disruptions also limit a youth’s ability to engage in potentially positive high-school experiences such as clubs and sports teams, and they can lead an individual to disengage from the school experience.

**Family.** Family relationships strongly influence whether and how much an adolescent gets involved in problem behaviors such as substance use and self-reported criminal activity. Close parental monitoring and positive family involvement counterbalance negative peer influences and exert a check on associations with the “wrong friends.”<sup>16</sup> Emerging evidence indicates that parental involvement in juvenile justice programming can also help reduce recidivism.<sup>17</sup> While this is difficult to achieve with out-of-home placements far from the youth’s home, efforts to involve parents are essential to successful re-entry.

### Ways to improve institutional placement are clear, and they would make a difference.

Given that most experts believe institutional care should be used less frequently and more effectively, how do we achieve these goals? It is clear that the current model of large institutions can be greatly improved. Smaller residential facilities closer to the home community of the youth better serve the developmental needs of adolescents and families: they provide a better structure to closely monitor relationships with antisocial peers, provide more individualized care, include parents in their programming, and

develop links to services in the community that can be continued upon release.

Three changes should be priorities for practitioners and policymakers.

**1. To reduce harm to youth and society, use placement only for cases where public safety is the main concern.** Court practice should be closely monitored to ensure that placement is used only with youth at high risk for future offending.<sup>18</sup> Studies show that the negative effects of institutional placement are more likely to occur in adolescents at low risk of reoffending, and that we see greater reductions in recidivism following intensive institutional interventions when those interventions are focused on adolescents at higher risk of offending.<sup>19</sup> Screening offenders and limiting the use of institutional placement to the most appropriate adolescents is the first step in using it more fairly and effectively.

**2. To increase benefits, improve programming in institutional placements.** To realize the benefits of institutional care, institutions must use effective, evidence-based programs and must document their implementation to ensure that sound principles of practice are in place. Placements that use cognitive behavioral therapy, for instance, have lower rates of recidivism, and institutions that monitor and improve their practices to more consistently reflect “best practices” show better outcomes.<sup>20</sup>

**3. For best outcomes, improve the general environment of residential settings.** In addition to improving the content of interventions, institutions must improve the

environment in which they are delivered. Evidence from the Pathways study indicates that specific dimensions of the overall environment, as seen by the adolescent in that setting, make a difference when those individuals return to the community. Elements that lead to better outcomes include less harshness and higher levels of perceived fairness, a more individualized focus from care providers, less antisocial peer influence, and a focus on re-entry.<sup>21</sup> Methods for monitoring institutional environments and targeting improvements are essential to increasing their effectiveness.<sup>22</sup>

### **There are alternative ways to protect the public while meeting the considerable needs of adolescent offenders.**

While institutional placement has some undesirable consequences, simply reducing the number of adolescent offenders entering facilities is not a sufficient goal. That would abrogate the system's core missions of promoting positive development in these youth and making the community safer. Any services that replace the current system will have to reduce the negative effects of institutional placement while providing accountability, supervision, and effective, efficient interventions for identified needs. Meeting developmental needs is the path to promoting public safety in the long run.

For many youth, these goals will be better met by certain community-based programs than by confinement. The best programs give youth the tools to resist future offending and a better foundation for success in facing the next developmental challenge. These programs

combine close community supervision with focused programming, limit exposure to antisocial peers, involve parents, and promote positive community connections, especially with schools. They employ evidence-based strategies to address risk factors such as substance use and antisocial attitudes, as well as broader needs like mental health and impulse control. Communities need to increase their efforts to eliminate barriers to access, and work to improve the retention of justice-involved youths in these programs.

### **The measure of success must go beyond reducing recidivism.**

A community-based, developmentally focused approach to juvenile justice has implications for how we measure success. It would force providers and the courts to move beyond recidivism as the only relevant factor, and to view adolescent offenders as more than the sum of their offense history. Like other youth, they would be seen as having the potential for growth and change, and the juvenile justice system would have to consider how it has supported or expanded this potential. Advocates for "positive youth development,"<sup>23</sup> for example, urge the juvenile justice system to support learning and growth in six life domains: work, education, relationships, community, health, and creativity. Building these into programs and evaluating a program's effectiveness at promoting skills in these areas would be a major, positive shift for the juvenile justice system.

Whatever specific programs are chosen, it is time for the juvenile justice system to expand community-based options and focus on promoting positive adolescent development. It is a clear step toward achieving community safety through promoting developmental success.

## FURTHER READING

### [Positive Youth Justice—Framing Justice Interventions Using the Concepts of Positive Youth Development.](#)

Butts, Bazemore & Meroe, 2010. Washington, DC: Coalition for Juvenile Justice.

### [The Costs of Confinement: Why Good Juvenile Justice Policies Make Good Fiscal Sense](#) The Justice Policy Institute, May 2009.

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The Pathways to Desistance study is a multi-site, longitudinal study of serious adolescent offenders as they transition from adolescence into early adulthood. It is funded by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation in partnership with federal and state agencies and other foundations. For more information, contact Carol Schubert at [schubertca@upmc.edu](mailto:schubertca@upmc.edu), or visit the Pathways website, [www.pathwaysstudy.pitt.edu](http://www.pathwaysstudy.pitt.edu).

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**Models for Change: Systems Reform in Juvenile Justice**, launched in 2004, is a multi-state initiative working to guide and accelerate advances in juvenile justice, to make systems more fair, effective, rational, and developmentally appropriate.

The Resource Center Partnership is expanding the reach of the *Models for Change* initiative—its lessons, best practices, and knowledge built over a decade of work—to more local communities and states. The Partnership provides practitioners and policymakers with technical assistance, trainings, tools, and resources for juvenile justice reform.

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Because institutional placement is likely to remain in use, especially for serious or chronic offenders, juvenile justice systems need to understand its effects and how to use it to improve outcomes and reduce harm for young offenders and their communities. The starting point is to consider institutional placement in the framework of adolescent development: How can it impede positive adolescent development, and how can it be used instead to promote positive development?

## IMPROVE RESIDENTIAL PLACEMENT.

Based on findings from the Pathways study, researchers recommend three core changes to improve the use of placement:

- To reduce harm: Use placement only for cases where public safety is the main concern.
- To realize the benefits of institutional care: Use effective, evidence-based programming and continually monitor and improve it.
- For best outcomes: Improve the institutional environment in which interventions are delivered: decrease harshness and increase fairness as viewed by youth in placement; provide individualized care; reduce antisocial peer influence; focus on re-entry from day one.

## PROVIDE PROVEN ALTERNATIVES TO RESIDENTIAL PLACEMENT.

For many youth, the goals of reducing recidivism and promoting positive development are better met outside of placement, in evidence-based programs that:

- Combine close community supervision with focused programming.
- Limit exposure to antisocial peers.
- Involve parents and promote positive community connections.



## FURTHER READING

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