



Systems barriers to community re-entry for incarcerated youths: A review



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1. Introduction

Although the numbers of young offenders who are incarcerated have reduced in recent times in western countries such as Australia, the United Kingdom, and in some states in the USA (Ministry of Justice, 2016; New South Wales Department of Juvenile Justice, 2015; Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2016), those who are detained can experience many challenges on returning to their communities (Nellis & Hooks Wayman, 2009). It is well documented in the research literature that young people who become involved with the juvenile justice (JJ) system have some of the poorest life outcomes of any group of young people in terms of education, employment, and wellbeing (Baltodano, Mathur, & Rutherford, 2005). Involvement in the JJ system during high school years often leads to educational deficits that impact employment options, with long-term effects on earnings (Sharlein, 2016) and employability. Further, incarceration can lead to further offending and incarceration, where aside from the social-emotional costs on the young person, the economic cost of chronic offending on the community has been estimated to exceed one million dollars in Australia and the USA (Baldry, Dowse, McCausland, & Clarence, 2012; Snyder & Sickmund, 2006).

Many young offenders have complex lives, where disability, race, and poverty intersect (Halsey, 2007). Disengagement with education is common among young offenders, with truancy and poor literacy shown to predict future offending (Rocque, Jennings, Piquero, Ozkan, & Farrington, 2016; Rucklidge, McLean, & Bateup, 2013). To meet their complex needs, many stakeholders may be involved in assisting these youths as they transition back to the community (Strnadová, Cumming, & O'Neill, 2016; Mathur & Griller Clark, 2014). Problematically, the policies and organizational systems of these stakeholders can cause or exacerbate the barriers these youth face (Liddle, Dakof, Henderson, & Rowe, 2011). These barriers can stem from within (intra) or across (inter) organizations.

1.1. Barriers to transition

The transition phase for juveniles that have served time in detention is typically viewed as the period of one or two months pre-release to the first six months after release (Altschuler & Brash, 2004). These first days and months post-release are critical for re-engaging the young person in

pro-social activities that connect the young person to the community, such as education, employment, and leisure (Griller Clark & Unruh, 2010). Re-engaging youths can be difficult, as young people can become institutionalized and may lack initiative or motivation on their return to the community (Halsey, 2007). It is important to understand the challenges and barriers that young people experience on reentry, as systems and policies attempt to balance the needs and rights of the youth, with managing the risks to the community (Anthony et al., 2010).

The barriers youth face when leaving JJ centers can come from several areas. Anthony et al. (2010) identified five areas of need of young offenders returning to the community: social and community, educational, occupational, independent living, and health. Further, these barriers can be internal or external. Internal barriers are those that the youths themselves create, in how they: perceive themselves as bad, learn to manage their freedom and unstructured time, and resist old habits and associates (Abrams, 2006, 2012; Unruh, Povenmire-Kirk, & Yamamoto, 2009).

Externally, families, although known to be among the most important source of support during transition, can also present barriers to transition, in failing to offer needed structure, boundaries, food, and stable, safe shelter (Shanahan & diZerega, 2016; Unruh et al., 2009). The neighborhoods where these youths return to can also present barriers to a successful transition back to the community through a lack of employment opportunities, positive social climate, and access to a high density of alcohol outlets (Abrams & Freisthler, 2010). Community perceptions of young offenders can also inhibit opportunities to reengage with employment and education (Unruh et al., 2009).

1.2. Organizational systems barriers

Organizations such as government departments, non-government organizations, and agencies typically operate hierarchically as a system. They have clear lines of authority, defined duties or responsibilities, and processes for intra and inter-level communication between personnel (Diefenbach, 2013). These systems are external to the young person and are often imposed upon them as a condition of their release (Halsey, 2007). They have little choice in whether to interact with these external organizational systems. Although the purpose of these systems and policies is to support young offenders returning to the community,

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organizational barriers may arise that impact young people in the system, leading to adverse outcomes. Halsey suggested that problems stem from a focus on risk and recidivism rather than on desistance. Further, Halsey called for more attention to be paid to “attenuating the risks associated with particular bureaucratic and political shortcomings or initiatives” (p. 1253), and to providing basic, practical assistance that could support and build these young people up.

This literature review draws attention to how intra- and inter-organizational barriers external to youth impact their transition back to the community from incarceration and offers possible solutions drawn from other fields. Intra-organizational barriers are defined here as those that arise *within* an organization that can be caused through poor communication, procedures, or practices (Machura, 2016). Inter-organizational barriers are defined here as those that occur *between* more than one and across organizations, where more than one organization is involved in supporting the youth (Machura, 2016).

Organizational issues noted in the literature, such as Liddle et al. (2011), included disconnected departments and agencies, a lack of collaborative practices in service coordination, and competition for funds and resources. Hartwell, Fisher, and Davis (2010) also noted a lack of continuity of service provision in areas such as mental health, as young people transition from child to adult services. Youth involved in both the child welfare and JJ system may also experience problems in service provision, with confusion as to which service, JJ or child welfare, should take responsibility for problem behavior (Osgood, Foster, & Courtney, 2010).

Further systematic issues were noted by Platt, Bohac, and Wade (2015), where courts set parole conditions that young offenders often struggled to satisfy: attending school daily, achieving passing grades, completing special programs, and staying away from old associates (Field & Abrams, 2010). Platt et al. also noted problems caused by security measures at JJ centers that can make multidisciplinary team meetings difficult. Others have identified inadequate staffing levels and training, poor records transfer, reluctance of schools to enroll these youths, and differing philosophies of the JJ and education sectors that can impede activities such as work experience programs, or attending job or community school interviews (Griller Clark & Unruh, 2010; Osgood et al., 2010).

Given the multitude of issues noted above, and recent trends in juvenile justice, such as the need for compliance with state educational standards and assessments in the Every Student Succeeds Act (2015), a review of recent research literature on organizational barriers to transition experienced by youths is needed. Identifying organizational systems barriers can provide opportunities for organizations to improve their policies and processes. The research question that guided the review was: What organizational barriers are experienced by incarcerated youths returning to the community as identified by the youths and other relevant stakeholders?

2. Method

The authors took a systematic approach (Aveyard, 2007) to the literature review. A systematic approach involves the identification of a specific research question, and a systematic, well-documented literature review search process, followed by analysis to answer the question. The rationale for the review was that there can be great diversity in the departments and agencies involved in the transition of incarcerated youths back to the community, all of which are influenced by local policies and practices. Identifying organizational barriers reported across nations offers opportunities for reflection and change.

2.1. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

The criteria for inclusion in this literature review included articles that were: a) research studies or program evaluations, b) about youths aged up to 18 years, c) from the perspective of youths or stakeholders

involved in the transition process, d) in whole, or part, about barriers, challenges, issues, or problems caused by organizational systems, e) published since 2007, f) in English, and g) from a peer-reviewed journal. The rationale for including only articles published since 2007 was two-fold. The authors aimed to review articles published in last ten years to ensure that the most up-to-date data on organizational barriers in juvenile justice transition were collected. Secondly, there have been relatively recent justice policy changes internationally, which could potentially impact the organizational barriers youth returning from a juvenile justice center back to the community experience. Articles that were focused on barriers caused by social systems, or the nature of the local environment (e.g., low socio-economic) were excluded, as were articles that focused on psychological characteristics of the young people (e.g., low self-esteem).

2.2. Search strategy

Four databases - *PsycInfo*, *Proquest Education*, *Criminal Justice Abstracts*, and *Scopus* - were searched for research studies focused on systems barriers that young offenders, their families, stakeholders, or service provider personnel identified as causing difficulties in the transition or re-entry back to the community. Advanced keyword searches (see Appendix A) were used to locate journal articles that had been published from January 2007 to October 2016. These keywords were used to search article titles, abstracts, and key concepts.

A total of 753 articles were returned from the initial keyword searches. To ensure reliability, each database search was conducted independently by the first author, and then independently by a research assistant. The first author and a research assistant independently coded the article abstracts for their apparent match to the search criteria, with 60 articles retained. Inter-rater reliability for the decision of what articles to retain for further examination was good at $\kappa = .84$. Disagreements were resolved via discussion.

From the 60 retained, 35 unique articles (non-duplicates) were independently read by the first author and a research assistant, and coded for match to the seven selection criteria. Inter-rater reliability for this stage was high, $\kappa = .88$. A total of 13 articles met the study criteria. The second author then conducted an ancestral search of the reference section of the 13 articles and located a further four articles that met the criteria. Inter-rater reliability for the ancestral search process was conducted by a research assistant coding one-in-three of the article titles in the reference section for suitability for further examination. Inter-rater reliability was high at $\kappa = .91$ for this process.

3. Results

Seventeen articles that met the search criteria identified both intra and inter-agency barriers. Most ($n = 14$) included the perspective of the youths, nine exclusively so. Details of the study participants in the articles reviewed are shown in Table 1, as are the research methods which were predominantly qualitative. The intra-and inter-organizational barriers identified in this review are presented below.

3.1. Intra-organizational barriers

Intra-organizational barriers: those that exist within an organization (Machura, 2016) were identified in 15 of the 17 studies in this literature review. Intra-organizational barriers were reported in the education, social services, housing, finances, and juvenile justice and law enforcement systems, but not in the employment system. Barriers existed in all the countries included in this review.

3.1.1. Education

Intra-organizational barriers to education were discussed in seven studies in this review. A repeated theme in the studies reviewed was the barrier to enrollment brought about by the slow or non-existent *transfer*

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