

Young Offenders Often Released into Risky Neighborhood Environments

A recent study published in the *Journal of the Society for Social Work and Research* examined the neighborhood environment into which young offenders are typically released after incarceration. How well young offenders adjust to their post-release environment can have a profound impact on their future. Most research on youth reentering the community following incarceration has focused on individual-level risks for negative outcomes. A recent study carried out by researchers at UCLA and the Prevention Research Center of the Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation explores the associations between the characteristics of the neighborhoods the rates of youth reentering the community following incarceration. Not surprisingly, the researchers found that the neighborhoods with the riskiest environments were those to which young offenders were likely to return after a period of incarceration.

The study measured the rate of juvenile offenders (per 1000 youth aged 10 to 19 years) in each ZIP code released back to the community after serving a sentence in one of 18 probation camps in Los Angeles County. On average, these youth served 5 months at the probation camps. A survey of youth leaving the camps showed that 93% of youth surveyed planned to return to the same neighborhood that they lived in prior to incarceration.

The study measured the risks in the environment in these communities, including community violence, alcohol outlet density, and vacant housing. Community violence was measured using hospital records of assault injuries. The density of alcohol outlets was measured by the number of off-premise outlets, restaurants that serve alcohol, and bars per area.

The study found that reentry rates for juvenile offenders were higher in neighborhood areas with higher levels of poverty and a higher percentage of racial/ethnic minority residents. These findings make sense given the disproportionate numbers of poor and racial/ethnic minority youth involved in all aspects of the juvenile justice system. In addition, the ZIP codes with greater densities of off-premise alcohol outlets had higher rates of reentry. This finding was similar to previous studies showing positive relationships between off-premise alcohol outlets and a variety of youth problems as well as rates of adult crime. ZIP codes with higher per capita level of violence (as measured by assaults) also had higher juvenile reentry rates.

Examining resources alone, the number of youth-focused services available per ZIP code (including services specifically for transition-age youth) had a positive relationship with reentry rates whereas the number of mental health services (including substance abuse programs) and education services were negatively associated with rates of reentry. When the researchers looked at the availability of resources along with the presence of risks, the

resources were not found to be associated with the number of young people returning from incarceration.

The researchers hypothesized that the location of services may not matter if neighborhood risks are not modified. Co-author of the paper, Bridget Freisthler stated, “When neighborhood environments include a culture of violence, young people may be influenced to participate in violence as a means of survival or to protect themselves or their families. If we want to influence the future behavior of these young people who have already been in trouble with the law, it may be much more effective to try to change these neighborhoods rather than trying to change the mindset of individual youth. That has traditionally been the way probation services have been designed, but perhaps we should design services that help make the neighborhoods safer and less violent.”

The study authors conclude that the return of youthful offenders to the community following incarceration is a social problem with long-lasting social and economic consequences for low-income neighborhoods. Dr Freisthler stated, “After decades of research and practice focusing on individually oriented solutions, we are now turning our attention to ways in which we can protect these vulnerable young people through helping to create safer neighborhoods to which they can return.” Co-author Dr. Laura Abrams, whose scholarship focuses on juvenile incarceration, sees this study as a first step in better understanding how neighborhoods structure opportunities for returning youthful offenders. “We are well aware of that young people must overcome major challenges in order to be successful when they return to their community. This study can help us reframe our prevention efforts to include the neighborhood environment in a more comprehensive approach.”

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