

New Survey Provides a Glimpse Of The Youth Reentry Population

By Melissa Sickmund

Based on data from the 1999 Census of Juveniles in Residential Placement (CJRP) conducted by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, it was estimated that nearly 100,000 juvenile offenders were released from custody facilities following conviction.¹ Preliminary analyses of the latest CJRP data show that the one-day count of juveniles committed to facilities following conviction has declined substantially since 1999. From 1999 to 2003, the committed population in custody on the census day dropped 10 percent from about 80,500 to fewer than 70,600.² Thus, the size of the juvenile reentry population is presumably smaller today than it was in 1999. Data from the 2003 CJRP and 2003 Survey of Youth in Residential Placement (SYRP) provide a current understanding of the characteristics of candidates for reentry programs.

Characteristics of Youth Reentry Candidates

With the 2003 CJRP, a demographic profile of youths who will become reentry program candidates can be developed. So as not to overrepresent the characteristics of youths with very long lengths of stay, the analysis focuses on committed youths who had been in a facility for four to six months. Using these data, the characteristics of the juvenile reentry population can roughly be described as the following:

- 57 percent of reentry youths come from public facilities operated by county or other local agencies, 45 percent from public facilities operated by state agencies;

- 43 percent of reentry youths come from privately operated facilities;
- 86 percent are male;
- 40 percent are non-Hispanic white, 38 percent are black and 18 percent are Hispanic;
- 12 percent are age 14 or younger, 44 percent are age 15 or 16, 44 percent are age 17 or older; and
- 34 percent were committed for a person offense (most likely simple assault), 32 percent for a property offense (most likely burglary), 10 percent for a drug offense, 10 percent for a public order offense, 10 percent for a technical violation of probation or parole, and 5 percent for a status offense.

More than half of these youths were held in public facilities with doors or gates that are locked day and night. More than one-third of these youths come from facilities that have living quarters, wings, floors or units that are locked for all youths day and night. The majority of facilities holding these youths said they provide on-site residential treatment (85 percent), most often mental health (63 percent) or substance abuse (67 percent) treatment. Fewer than four in 10 violent offenders were in facilities providing treatment specifically for violent offenders.

Prior "Convictions" And Prior Custody

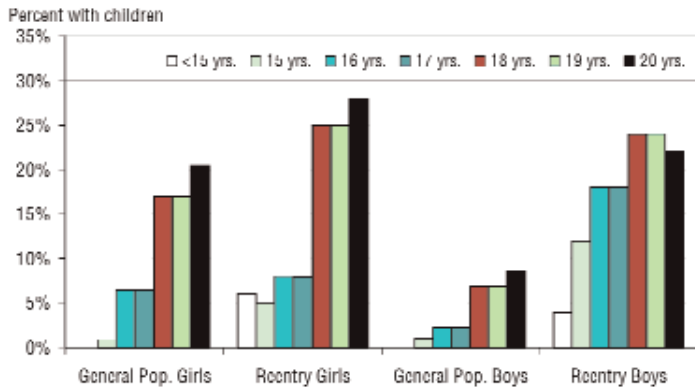
Preliminary analyses of the 2003 SYRP data show that most candidates for youth reentry programs said they had at least one prior commitment (62 percent).³ About one-fourth (23 percent) had been convicted⁴ of an

offense, but had not been in custody before their current placement, and some (6 percent) had previously been in custody but had not been convicted before. Eight percent said they had no prior convictions and had not been in custody before. Among those who had been in custody before, two in 10 said they had been in custody only once before, four in 10 said they had been held two to four times, and four in 10 said they had been held five or more times before.

The prior histories of potential reentry candidates varied somewhat by gender, age and current offense. Similar proportions of girls and boys said they had been committed to custody following conviction at least once before. Of those in custody before, 43 percent of girls and 39 percent of boys said they had been held five or more times. Sixty-four percent of youths age 15 or older had been committed before. Surprisingly, for younger youths, the proportion was 58 percent. Among youth reentry candidates whose most serious current offense was a person offense, 61 percent said they had been committed at least once before, 22 percent said they had at least one prior conviction but no prior custody experiences, 6 percent said they had been in custody at least once before but had not been convicted, and 10 percent reported no prior convictions or custody experiences. Among those held for a property offense, 66 percent said they had been committed at least once before and 6 percent reported no prior convictions or custody experiences. The proportions of property offenders with prior custody but no prior convictions, or prior convictions but no prior custody, did not differ from those of person offenders. Further, the number of

Figure 1.

Compared with youths in the general population, at all ages, higher proportions of youths who are reentry candidates are themselves parents.



Sources: National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, 2003 and Survey of Youth in Residential Placement, 2003.

prior custody experiences did not vary much by offense.

For youths who were previously in custody, released and subsequently re-offended, 18 percent committed offenses that were more serious than their previous offense, 40 percent committed offenses at the same severity level, and for 24 percent, their current offense was less serious than their prior offense. Girls and older youths were somewhat more apt than their counterparts to report a decrease in offense severity. Youths whose current offense was a person offense tended to have maintained the same offense severity or increased their offense seriousness.

Family Situations

When they entered custody, 56 percent of committed youths had been living with one parent, 19 percent were living with two parents and 26 percent were not living with any parent. Girls and older youths were somewhat more apt than their counterparts to report not living with parents when they entered custody.

Overall, one in 11 reentry candidates said they had children of their own. Among girls, 6 percent said they had at least one child and an additional 4 percent said they were expecting. Older youths were more likely than younger youths to report having or expecting children. At all ages, reentry candidates were substantially more likely than their counterparts in the general population to

report having children (see Figure 1).⁵

Emotional Problems

As part of the SYRP interviews, youths were asked a series of questions designed to detect several different types of emotional problems. Although 10 percent of youths reported no problems, many youths (71 percent) reported more than one type of problem. The majority of committed youths indicated some degree of anger problem (81 percent), and most also expressed anxiety (61 percent) or depression (59 percent). One in six (17 percent) youths reported having hallucinations, one in four said they had suicidal feelings or ideas (27 percent) and one in five said they attempted suicide at least once in their life (21 percent). About four in 10 female candidates for reentry reported suicide attempts, as did two in 10 males. In comparison, in the general population, fewer than one in 10 males and females in the same age group reported suicide attempts.

Implications

These data indicate that substantial proportions of the juvenile reentry population are likely to return to the community needing extensive supervision and support services in order to succeed. Few of these youths could be classified as “first-timers” in the juvenile justice system.

Although most did not return with more serious charges, two in 10 of those with a previous custody experience had increased the seriousness of their offending. Most youths will return to live with single parents who may benefit from programs that will help them adequately supervise their children. Nearly three-fourths of these youths (71 percent) expressed multiple types of emotional problems and could, no doubt, benefit from mental health services upon returning home. In addition, many of these youths are or will soon be parents to their own children who may benefit from programs like home nurse visitation that teach parenting skills. Without addressing these and other factors that have an impact on youths’ ability to become productive citizens, reentry programs and the youths they serve will find it difficult to succeed.

ENDNOTES

¹ Snyder, H. 2004. An empirical portrait of the youth reentry population. *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice*, 2(1):39-55.

² Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. 1999, 2001, 2004 and 2004. *Census of Juveniles in Residential Placement 1997, 1999, 2001 and 2003* (data files). Washington, D.C.: U.S. Census Bureau.

³ Sedlak, A. and C. Bruce. 2004. Unpublished analysis of 2003 Survey of Youth in Residential Placement data: Profile of the committed population. Rockville, Md.: Westat Inc.

⁴ The term “conviction” used in this article refers primarily to juvenile court rather than criminal court adjudications.

⁵ Sedlak, A. and C. Bruce. 2004.

Bureau of Labor Statistics. 2003. *National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997, waves 1-5* (data file). Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Labor.

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