

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

California's Los Angeles County is home to the largest juvenile justice system in the United States. The county incarcerates juvenile offenders in one of 19 probation camps, or residential facilities, and typically releases the juveniles within a year. As juveniles leave confinement, they face the daunting challenge of abruptly reentering their communities, often without adequate support.

Reentry is challenging for any prison population, but for juvenile offenders it is particularly complicated because of the range of developmental changes these youth experience. Additionally, juveniles in the L.A. County juvenile justice system, or the Probation Department, are burdened by high rates of mental illness, substance abuse, gang involvement, and low rates of educational attainment. For too many juveniles, these barriers to reentry go unnoticed or unaddressed, making it difficult to successfully reintegrate into their communities. Recidivism rates are high. While the Probation Department does not collect and share outcome data, the available evidence indicates that youth outcomes are grim.

While the Probation Department should be credited for undergoing notable changes over the last few years, its reentry process requires improvement. The typical reentry process juveniles experience reveals numerous holes and challenges, such as difficulty re-enrolling in school, interruption of medical services and inadequate or nonexistent structured activities in the community where they reside. By comparing the Los Angeles reentry process to national best practices, we conclude that pre-release planning, transition services, interagency collaboration and data collection can all be strengthened. While there are some effective tools and policies in place, the Probation Department lacks a system that adequately prepares most juveniles for reentry.

Fortunately, L.A. County and the Probation Department officials can look to a number of national programs we have deemed as models to improve the reentry process. There are also many local pilot reentry programs (both county and privately-led) that embody promising reentry models.

We recommend the county take the following actions to improve its reentry process:

1. Build up pre-release planning using a multi-disciplinary perspective.
2. Ease youth out of the controlled environment of confinement by incorporating step-down features into the transition.
3. Implement strategies to minimize education and health disruptions during reentry.
4. Build a county-run comprehensive strategy to address juvenile gang involvement.
5. Establish an accountability system for youth with graduated rewards and sanctions.
6. Centralize local information on reentry practices, programs and research.
7. Explore current county pilot programs to explore new ways for interagency collaboration.
8. Enforce consistent implementation of the Probation Department's reentry protocol.
9. Improve data collection and analysis capabilities of the Probation Department.
10. Evaluate and consider replicating promising LA programs, such as the Day Reporting Center, Long Beach Reentry and New Roads.