Those Who Do Not Return:

Correlates of the Work and School Engagement of Formerly Incarcerated Youth

The federal Office of Special Education’s “Transition Initiative” was articulated and implemented in the early 1980s, with the goal of improving the post-school work experiences of all students with disabilities (Will 1984). From a strict focus on employment instruction and outcomes, the initiative expanded to include a broader-based emphasis on community adjustment, of which employment was but one of several possible goals and outcomes (Halpern, 1993). Hundreds of projects have been conducted to address the transition needs of students in special education; both to study how best to provide transition services and describe the transition experiences of students with disabilities in community settings to provide a baseline of results from which to judge post-school achievement (Rusch, 1995).

Probably the best-known example of this latter group of projects was the National Longitudinal Transition Study (NLTS) (Wagner, 1992), which (a) included a nationally representative sample of special education students and (b) was conducted prospectively to describe the school leaving and community adjustment experiences of students for up to four years after leaving public school (Valdes, Williamson, & Wagner, 1990a, 1990b). One of the most salient findings from the NLTS was how poorly students with emotional disorders (ED) performed on nearly every transition outcome variable in relation to their peers with other types of disabilities (Marder, 1992; Valdes, et al, 1990). Further, youth with ED performed antisocial acts at rates far above those committed by members of other disability groups (Marder, 1992).

There have been few studies, however, on the facility-to-community transition of incarcerated youth and even fewer including or focusing on those individuals with a special education disability who are incarcerated (Rutherford, Bullis, Anderson Wheeler, & Griller, 2002). The importance of such findings has been underscored with the rise of violent crimes in the adolescent age group (Koop & Lundberg, 1992) and the increased concern among the general public about school safety and juvenile crime (Elam, Rose, & Gallup, 1994). It follows that if services to incarcerated youth are to be effective, resulting in better outcomes for them and a concomitant benefit to society, it is imperative to establish a baseline of information about their experiences in the community in order to guide those interventions. In the absence of such data, program revisions and services may completely miss important issues and procedures that could affect these persons’ community adjustment positively.

We recently completed the 5-year *TRACS* research project (Transition Research on Adjudicated Youth in Community Settings) (Bullis, Yovanoff, Havel, & Mueller, 2001), which examined the facility-to-community transition experiences of youth who were incarcerated in the Oregon Youth Authority (OYA), the state’s juvenile correctional system. We recruited a sample of youth with and without a special education disability and gathered data on (a) their educational, personal, and criminal histories and (b) the services and treatment they received while in the juvenile correctional system. After exiting OYA, we conducted interviews every six months with the youth and, if possible, a family member, to profile the youth’s work, education, living, and social experiences and the community-based services they received.

In this article we discuss part of that larger research effort and focus on the subsample of participants who remained in the community for the 12-month period after exiting the juvenile correctional system. This subsample is especially interesting as there was an overall return rate to the juvenile correctional system of roughly 45 to 50% for the *TRACS* sample (Bullis & Yovanoff, 2001) and for the population of incarcerated youth in Oregon from 1994 through 1997 (Bullis & Yovanoff, 1997). (Note: Return rate should *not* be equated with recidivism. Because youth may return to the juvenile correctional system for reasons other than re-arrest, such as parole violations, recidivism tends to occur less frequently than return.) The vast majority of those youth who return to the juvenile correctional system in Oregon do so within 12-months (Bullis & Yovanoff, 1997). Thus, those youth who remain in the community for at least one year constitute a unique group that demands particular scrutiny.

We examined this subsample’s “engagement” (an outcome variable based on a combination of work and/or educational involvement) at two points in time: 6-months post-exit (Time 1) and 12-months post-exit (Time 2) from OYA. Specifically, two research questions were addressed: What was the engagement rate of the subsample at Time 1? At Time 2? and What combination of demographic and service delivery variables best predicted the subsample’s engagement at Time 1? At Time 2?