

Transition services for incarcerated youth: A mixed methods evaluation study[☆]

Laura S. Abrams^{a,*}, Sarah K.S. Shannon^b, Cindy Sangalang^c

^a *University of California, Los Angeles, United States*

^b *University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, United States*

^c *University of California, Los Angeles, United States*

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Abstract

Despite a considerable overlap between child welfare and juvenile justice populations, the child welfare literature contains sparse information about transition and reentry programs for incarcerated youth. Using mixed methods, this paper explores the benefits and limitations of a six-week transitional living program for incarcerated youth offenders. Logistic regression analysis found that only age at arrest and number of prior offenses predicted the odds of recidivism at one-year post-release. Youth who participated in the transitional living program and dual status youth (those involved in both child welfare and juvenile justice systems) were slightly more likely to recidivate, but these differences were not statistically significant. Qualitative interviews with youth and staff revealed that both groups viewed the transitional living program as having many benefits, particularly independent living skills training. However, follow-up with youth in the community lacked sufficient intensity to handle the types of challenges that emerged. Implications for future research and transition programming with vulnerable youth are discussed.

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1. Introduction

The past several years have witnessed increased interest in transition and reentry services for incarcerated youth (Mears & Travis, 2004). Nearly 100,000 juvenile offenders are released annually from out-of-home correctional or custodial facilities (Snyder, 2004); and according to meta-analyses, at least 45% of released youth offenders will be arrested for another crime in the weeks, months, or few years following their release (Lipsey, 1999; Wilson, Lipsey, & Soydan, 2003). High recidivism rates and other poor outcomes for formerly incarcerated youth prompt some scholars to question the value of intensive correctional rehabilitation programs without adequate transition or reentry services (Author, 2006; Steinberg, Chung, & Little, 2004).

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* Corresponding author. Department of Social Welfare, School of Public Affairs, 3250 Public Affairs Building, PO Box 951656, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1656, United States. Tel.: +1 310 206 0693; fax: +1 310 206 7564.

E-mail address: abrams@spa.ucla.edu (L.S. Abrams).

The child welfare literature has not widely considered youth reentry services, yet there are several reasons to attend to this evolving field of study. First, although data are scarce, existing evidence shows significant overlap between the child welfare and juvenile justice populations. For example, [Jonson-Reid and Barth \(2000\)](#) found that 19% of youth incarcerated in California Youth Authority facilities had child abuse cases investigated after age six, which they consider a “conservative” estimate of the total number of dependent youth who are incarcerated as juveniles. Moreover, longitudinal studies demonstrate that both child maltreatment and child welfare system involvement are significant risk factors for future involvement in juvenile or adult penal systems ([English, Widom, & Brandford, 2001](#); [Widom 1989, 2003](#)).

There are also many parallels between the issues of youth reentry and the transition to independence from foster care ([Snyder, 2004](#)). Research finds similar, distressing outcomes for youth who transition to adulthood from either the child welfare or juvenile justice systems. For example, [Cook, Fleischman, and Grimes’ \(1991\)](#) study of youth aging out of foster care found that two to four years after discharge, only 54% completed high school or obtained a GED, 30% received some form of public assistance, and 25% spent at least one night homeless. Another longitudinal study of youth exiting foster care highlighted high rates of mental health services use and highly unstable employment patterns ([Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor, & Nesmith, 2001](#)). The youth reentry population faces very similar risks as former foster youth. [Bullis and Yovanoff’s \(2002\)](#) longitudinal study of over 500 released juvenile offenders in Oregon found that at one-year post-release only 31% were engaged in either work *or* school. It is also estimated that one out of every five youth in the juvenile justice system has serious mental health problems ([Cocozza & Skowrya, 2000](#)).

Despite considerable overlap in child welfare and juvenile justice populations and documentation of similar transition challenges, there is little published research in the child welfare literature that investigates transition or reentry services for incarcerated youth. The purpose of this paper is to describe and evaluate a transitional living program designed to prepare incarcerated youth for community reentry through gradual freedoms and life skills training in the context of a six-week transition cottage. In this exploratory evaluation study, the authors use mixed methods to understand the benefits and limitations of the transitional living program model and its potential to reduce the risk of recidivism and other troubling outcomes for vulnerable youth involved in one or more public systems of care.

2. Literature review

2.1. Transition services for incarcerated youth

Research documents multiple and interrelated challenges for formerly incarcerated youth in the arenas of employment, educational attainment, mental health, substance abuse, and housing ([Altschuler & Brash, 2004](#)). In response, juvenile justice scholars suggest that youth who are reentering their communities from correctional settings need specific supports to successfully reintegrate into society, requiring more than just surveillance-oriented probation services. These transition strategies should help youth to practice and maintain pro-social behaviors and skills learned in secure confinement and to continue to infuse structure and goal-setting into their home lives ([Altschuler & Brash, 2004](#); [Spencer & Jones-Walker, 2004](#)). Juvenile justice experts also suggest that transition services should be targeted to individual needs with a wide array of interventions and linkages with social networks, and that youth should receive supervision that gradually tapers off in intensity ([Altschuler & Armstrong, 2001](#)).

The most extensive recent research on juvenile reentry program models has focused on the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) initiated Intensive Aftercare Program (IAP). The IAP model emphasizes individualized treatment during the incarceration phase, a structured, distinct transition phase, supportive community resources in aftercare and varying degrees of surveillance in the community, depending on offenders’ level of risk. The IAP is considered to be distinct from other models based on its structured transition period and an emphasis on reentry throughout all phases of correctional confinement ([Altschuler & Armstrong, 2001](#)).

In 1987, OJJDP established a research program to design, test, and disseminate information on the comprehensive IAP model for serious juvenile offenders. Initial process evaluations showed promising effects of several demonstration projects ([Altschuler & Armstrong, 2002, September](#)). However, two recent outcome evaluations found no statistically significant effects of the IAP program on recidivism between control and treatment groups. [Frederick and Roy’s \(2003, June\)](#) evaluation of New York’s IAP program found no reduction in post-release rates of

arrest, but did find a reduction in violent recidivism, particularly in the first six months post-release. More recently, the National Council on Crime and Delinquency's evaluation of three IAP sites in the cities of Denver, Las Vegas, and Norfolk, Virginia examined a range of outcomes using experimental designs. Across the three program sites, the study found no differences between IAP and controls on measures of recidivism (arrest or conviction) and no differences in the severity of these offenses (Wiebush, Wagner, McNulty, Wang, & Le, 2005). However, the authors did find an impact on intermediate indicators of success, such as lower numbers of misconduct reports during incarceration and decreased length of institutionalization for IAP program participants. Moreover, qualitative interviews conducted as part of this comprehensive evaluation found that facility staff believed peer and family influences to be the key determinants of reentry outcomes for youth. Staff reported that while the institutions provided services to address these concerns, they were the hardest areas to influence (Wiebush et al., 2005).

Overall, Wiebush et al. (2005) caution against dismissing the IAP as a viable model for transition and reentry services, arguing that attention should be given to intervention fidelity. They also assert that greater financial and technical assistance may improve IAP outcomes. Similarly, Frederick and Roy (2003, June) question whether difficulties in faithful implementation of IAP led to their findings of mostly null effects. In sum, although the IAP is hailed as a premiere transition and reentry model, lessons drawn from program demonstrations lack evidence of success in reducing recidivism. It is also unclear *why* a program with such intensive transition preparation has not produced discernable or quantifiable results.

2.2. Dual status youth and transitions

A growing body of research centers on youth who are involved in both the child welfare and juvenile justice systems, otherwise known as “dual status” or “crossover” youth (Dunlap, 2006; Ryan, 2006). While the precise number of dual status youth is difficult to measure, research documents that maltreatment and dependency are significant risk factors for delinquency and juvenile incarceration (Ryan & Testa, 2005; Widom, 2003). Foster care status and aging out of the child welfare system are also risk factors for criminal involvement. For example, Courtney et al. (2001) found that 18% of youth transitioning out of out-of-home care had been arrested at least once within twelve to eighteen months. In a different study comparing a sample of youth transitioning from out-of-home care with a nationally representative sample of youth, Cusick and Courtney (2007) found that the proportion of offenses committed by transitioning youth was double that of the national sample.

Although the various points of connection and overlap between child welfare and juvenile justice system involvement are established, very little research has examined the outcomes of incarceration or correctional treatment programs for dual status youth. In the one recidivism study that we were able to locate involving youth in the child welfare system, Ryan (2006) found that a “Positive Peer Culture” model was less effective in reducing recidivism for dependent youth compared to their non-dependent peers. Other studies with dual status youth focus more on pathways through these two systems. For example, in one study examining pre-adjudication detention decision among youth in New York City, youth with prior involvement in foster care were 10% more likely to be detained than those with no history of foster care (Conger & Ross, 2001). Freundlich and Morris' (2004) qualitative research found that dependent youth within the juvenile justice system reported to have inadequate legal representation and harsher punishments for less severe offenses than their non-dependent counterparts.

Some of the challenges related to understanding criminal trajectories of youth in the child welfare system stems from their involvement in complex and sometimes competing public bureaucracies. However, greater awareness of the concerns and negative outcomes associated with concurrent child dependency and delinquency statuses has resulted in recent federal and state policies supporting coordinated responses to dual status youth. The 2002 amendment of the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act included provisions that encouraged program development targeted toward dual system youth in order to reduce re-offending. Furthermore, the revised Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act of 2003 required states to report the number of cases that are transferred from child welfare to the state juvenile justice system (Dunlap, 2006). Even with greater policy attention, outcome data for these dual status youth as they transition to adulthood is difficult to locate. This gap may be partly attributed to the lack of clarity regarding the accountability for youth in both systems. Policies regarding the jurisdiction of crossover youth vary widely from state to state. For example, while some states allow for concurrent supervision dependency–delinquency cases, other states require that child welfare supervision ceases once a youth enters custody of delinquency court (Herz, Krinsky, & Ryan, 2006). In sum, little information exists regarding potentially different transition needs for dual status youth in juvenile

corrections. Given the current state of knowledge in this arena, exploratory and descriptive research concerning the dual status population is warranted.

2.3. *Study aims*

Given the scarcity of information on how specialized services can facilitate successful transitions for youth reentering their communities from correctional placements, particularly in the child welfare literature, the goal of this study is to describe and evaluate preliminary outcomes from an IAP-modeled program involving a six-week case-coordinated transitional living program. Mixed methods will be used to illustrate the benefits and limitations of this model in preparing youth for community reentry. The following specific aims will be addressed:

- 1) To examine recidivism outcomes for youth participants in a transitional living program at one-year post-release;
- 2) To explore child protective services involvement as a risk factor for recidivism at one-year post-release; and
- 3) To compare youth and staff perspectives on the strengths and limitations of the transitional living program in preparing youth for community reentry.

3. Method

3.1. *Setting and study design*

This study took place at a public correctional institution for felony-level juvenile offenders in a large urban area of the upper Midwest.¹ The facility houses youth offenders for periods of 9–12 months and offers both correctional (i.e. punitive, rules-driven) and rehabilitation-oriented (i.e. therapeutic) programming. As part of their rehabilitation, offenders are required to attend daily process groups and participate in cognitive-behavioral programming, substance abuse treatment, vocational rehabilitation, and other specialized therapeutic programs, such as anger management. Cognitive-behavioral techniques are stressed at all levels of the program. Youth are housed in cottages and primarily sorted by age, gender, and level of risk, with the exception of one cottage designated specifically for male sex offenders.

In 2002, the institution implemented a transitional living program (TLP)—a six-week intensive program that focuses on independent living skills—as part of their comprehensive IAP redesign. In this specific transition program, youth spend the night in the TLP cottage but are released into the community during the day to attend work or school and gradually spend increased time over the weekends in their home settings. Case managers work very closely with the youth to build their daily schedules and their plans for release. Only males are able to participate in the TLP intervention due to restrictions on mixed-gender housing.

A mixed methods design was used to conduct this exploratory evaluation study. The two primary methods included a quantitative analysis of recidivism outcomes for graduates of the TLP cottage in 2003 and qualitative interviews with TLP youth participants and program staff from 2004–2005. There are many ways to balance mixed methods, and no standard prescription (Padgett, 1998). In this study, the methods were implemented simultaneously and we used the qualitative component to understand and interpret the quantitative findings in more depth and with additional context.

3.2. *Quantitative analysis of existing records*

3.2.1. *Sample*

The sample for the quantitative component consisted of 83 offenders who were released from the correctional facility between January 1, 2003–December 31, 2003. This sample was a full population census of exiting offenders for the first year that the TLP was implemented. Of these 83 offenders, 46 males completed the TLP, and an additional 15 males and 22 females completed the treatment program but did not participate in the TLP. Some male offenders were excluded from the TLP due to administrative mandates (such as early release or transfers) or space limitations, rather than any systematic criteria. A court order from a county juvenile superior court judge was used as blanket permission to examine the de-identified quantitative data.

¹ The names of the facility, the program, and all the participants and staff are masked in this paper for confidentiality.

3.2.2. Data sources

Archival data were retrieved from two primary sources: 1) the state administrative data system for juvenile and adult offenders; and 2) official client case records. The state data was imported into an SPSS spread sheet with case number, and those case numbers were then matched to youths' records. The researchers then created fields for additional variables of interest extracted from the case records and added them to the existing state data.

Variables retrieved from the state administrative data included basic demographic information (age, gender, etc.), number of prior arrests, new substantiated crimes up to one-year post-release, and participation in the TLP. Variables retrieved from the intake forms included history of child welfare system involvement, family structure, substance abuse, and additional comprehensive descriptors of each case.

3.2.3. Independent variables

The primary independent variable is participation in the six-week TLP cottage. This variable was measured as “yes” or “no” and was extracted from the administrative data set. Child welfare system involvement (what we subsequently label CPS) is another key independent variable of interest. This variable is coded as “yes” if the client intake forms indicated past or current dependency status in the public child welfare system. The authors recognize the compromised validity of combining past and current dependency status into one variable. However the records that were available to the researchers did not clearly indicate these distinctions.

3.2.4. Dependent variable

The dependent variable for this analysis is recidivism at one-year post-release. There are many ways to operationalize recidivism (i.e. self-report, court referrals, etc.), and all have their benefits and limitations. For this study, recidivism is defined as any *substantiated* felony, misdemeanor, or status offense charge in either the juvenile or adult system within the year following their release from the program. The limitations of this variable are that we did not have access to out of state crime data, which may have reduced recidivism rates only slightly.

3.2.5. Control variables

Control variables retrieved from the administrative database included number of prior arrests, race, and age at admission to program. Prior studies establish that younger youth, those with more prior arrests, and youth of color are more likely to recidivate (Brent & Tollett, 1999; Heilbrun et al., 2000; Myner, Santman, Cappellety, & Perlmutter, 1998; Niarhos & Routh, 1992). Offense history is the most consistent predictor of recidivism across studies (Cottle, Lee, & Heilbrun, 2001).

Juvenile justice research handles investigations of racial differences in processes and outcomes in diverse ways. The body of recent research on “disproportionate minority confinement” (DMC), shows that youth of color more generally, and African American youth in particular, are disproportionately over-represented at all stages of juvenile justice processing. Here youth “of color” are lumped into one category, despite noted limitations (Pope, Lovell, & Hsia, 2002). Some recidivism research breaks down racial categories into African American, Hispanic, and White (Heilbrun et al., 2000; Myner et al., 1998); or African American, White, and “Other” (Cottle et al., 2001). Other studies, even with larger samples, simply use “White” and “Persons of Color” (Brent & Tollett, 1999) or “White” and “Black” (Schwalbe, Fraser, Day, & Cooley, 2006). In our study, race will be collapsed into two categories: “White” and “Youth of Color” due to the low numbers of youth comprising racial categories other than White or African American (see Table 1). Although dichotomizing race is not the most meaningful way to operationalize this category in light of the diversity among youth of color, for a small sample, it is the best way to preserve statistical power.

3.2.6. Analysis

Descriptive statistics were initially computed using SPSS to understand the basic demographics of the aggregate sample (i.e. age, gender, race, CPS status) and the recidivism rates at one-year post-release. Next, bivariate tests (*t*-tests and chi-square) were used to assess any systematic differences between TLP and non-TLP male participants and to explore possible correlates of recidivism at one-year post-release. The data were then transferred from SPSS to STATA. Using STATA, step-wise logistic regression models were run to understand the unique influence of the independent and control variables on recidivism rates at one-year post-release, beginning with control variables and subsequently adding the two independent variables. Finally, several interaction terms were explored for significance, resulting in the addition of one interaction term to the final model.

3.3. Qualitative interviews

3.3.1. Sample

The sample for the qualitative component of the study included 10 youth TLP participants, interviewed repeatedly over a six-month period, and one-time interviews with five TLP staff. For youth under age 18, parental consent was required for their participation. Youth who were 18 or over consented to their own participation. All of the youth referred to the TLP cottage during the first six months of the study period ($n=25$) were approached to participate in this component of the project. In all, 12 youth volunteered, and the required consent forms were obtained for 10 of those participants. All of these participants completed at least two interviews with an average of 3 interviews per participant.

The staff sample was also selected by convenience. All of the TLP staff (case managers and supervisors; $n=8$) were invited to participate in an interview. Of this group, five staff consented to the interview and completed the process.

3.3.2. Data collection

Interviews with youth were semi-structured. The initial interview took place during the youth's stay in the TLP cottage and subsequent interviews were continued for a variable period of time (4–6 months) upon their return to the community. The main purpose of the interview series was to understand their transition process and the role of the TLP cottage in preparing them for this transition. These interviews were taped with a digital recording device and took place either at the TLP cottage in a private room, at the youths' homes, or in public locations such as coffee shops or libraries. Follow-up interviews with three of the youth took place in correctional facilities following subsequent placements. The researchers (including the primary author, the second author, and another graduate student) had a list of topics to cover at each interview but were not required to follow any specific order. Youth were also asked to elaborate in areas where rich or pertinent information emerged.

Interviews with staff occurred after the youth interview component of the project was completed. These interviews were more structured than the youth set, in that all of the staff members who were interviewed were asked the same open-ended questions in a standard order. Questions were geared to gather staff perspectives on the important components of transition, the benefits and limitations of the TLP, and their views on the challenges of youths' post-release environments. Interviews with staff were completed in the correctional facility in a confidential meeting space.

3.3.3. Analysis

Digitally taped interviews were transcribed verbatim by a professional transcriber and imported into the QSR NVIVO software program. Analysis techniques followed Miles and Huberman's (1984) four stage process for qualitative data analysis, including: 1) data organization, 2) data management, 3) data reduction, and 4) interpretation/conclusion drawing. The authors first read the transcripts and marked areas where the respondents discussed their perceptions of program strengths and weaknesses and their views on successful transitions, including definitions of this term and their perceptions of TLP components that promoted successful transitions. These larger categories were then broken down into sub-categories through codes that were derived inductively from the transcripts. When all the data were coded, the authors created summary displays, including codes and key passages, for each participant. To facilitate data interpretation, findings were displayed in the aggregate and tables were created to reflect differences between youth and staff perceptions. When all of the visual displays were completed, the authors returned to the original data to check the assumptions they were making and to confirm the coding. Once these assumptions and codes were checked, the authors were able to draw several interpretations and comparisons between youth and staff perceptions of program strengths and limitations.

4. Results

4.1. Quantitative analysis

For the quantitative analysis, we first present descriptive statistics concerning the 2003 cohort, followed by recidivism outcomes, and then logistic regression models predicting recidivism for males who exited the facility in 2003.

4.1.1. Descriptive statistics

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for the exiting 2003 cohort as a whole ($n=83$) and two sub-groups: males who participated in the TLP in 2003 ($n=46$) and males who did not participate in the TLP ($n=15$) but who also completed

Table 1
Sample demographics

Variable	2003 cohort (<i>n</i> =83)	TLP 2003 (<i>n</i> =46)	Non-TLP males 2003 (<i>n</i> =15)
Mean age	15.9	15.6	16.4
Sex			
Male	73%	100%	100%
Female	27%		
Race			
White	18 (22%)	11 (24%)	5 (33%)
African American	41 (49%)	25 (54%)	6 (40%)
Native American	13 (16%)	7 (15%)	0
Asian	7 (8%)	2 (4%)	3 (20%)
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	4 (5%)	1 (2%)	1 (7%)
Mean prior arrests	11.6	12	10.4
CPS involvement			
No CPS	73%	63%	67%
CPS	27%	20%	20%

the correctional program. Key independent and control variables are included in this table, including average age at admission, gender, race, number of prior arrests, and child welfare system involvement (CPS).

As Table 1 indicates, the average age at admission for the 2003 cohort was nearly 16 years old. While females comprised 27% of the overall sample, they did not participate in the TLP intervention. For this reason, we confine the subsequent analyses of outcomes to the TLP male (*n*=46) and non-TLP male (*n*=15) sub-groups. The TLP sample was similar to the overall 2003 cohort in terms of race and number of prior arrests. In the overall sample, nearly 27% had prior or current dependency status in the child welfare system, and the proportions of CPS cases were equivalent among TLP males and non-TLP males (at 20%).

As stated earlier, the young men who did not participate in the TLP cottage were excluded from participation based on arbitrary administrative obstacles and space limitations. Table 1 shows that the non-TLP male group was slightly older (16.4 vs. 15.6 years), had slightly more White members (33% vs. 24%) and had slightly fewer prior arrests (mean of 10 vs. 12). Independent samples *t*-tests for the continuous variables, age at admission and prior arrests, and chi-square tests for the dichotomous variables, race and CPS involvement, indicated that none of these differences between TLP males and non-TLP males were statistically significant.

4.1.2. Recidivism outcomes

Table 2 presents basic recidivism outcomes in terms of new convictions for the 2003 sample. As a baseline consideration to be interpreted with caution, we first looked at outcomes from an evaluation of recidivism data conducted at the same facility in 2000 (Krmptich, 2002), before the implementation of the TLP cottage. Although we did not have direct access to the raw 2000 data, the information provided by the County for in the 2000 study allows us to examine some general indicators of recidivism outcomes. In 2000, the reconviction rate at one-year post-release, *not* including status offenses, was 34% overall (including both males and females). For the 2003 exiting cohort, the overall reconviction rate remained the same, at 33%. Overall, these descriptive statistics show that the rates of reconviction were very similar from 2000 and 2003 despite the advent of the transition program.

The next question we posed was, did the TLP intervention influence recidivism rates for 2003 participants? Table 2 displays the 2003 exiting cohort data concerning recidivism including all types of substantiated charges (felonies,

Table 2
Recidivism outcomes at one-year post-release

Group	Recidivism rate	Offense level			
		Felony	Gross misdemeanor	Misdemeanor	Status
2003 cohort	40%	12%	12%	8%	7%
TLP 2003	48%	20%	9%	11%	9%
Non-TLP Males 2003	27%	7%	13%	7%	0%

misdemeanors, and status offenses) in juvenile or adult court. Without controlling for risks, TLP males appeared to have higher reconviction rates than the 2003 cohort as a whole, and particularly more than non-TLP males. For the TLP group, the overall reconviction rate was 48%; and for non-TLP males, was 27%. TLP participants also had a higher rate of felony convictions than the 2003 cohort as a whole and the non-TLP males (20% vs. 12% and 7%, respectively). Thus, not only did TLP males have a higher recidivism rates, they also committed proportionately more felony-level offenses than either the overall cohort or the non-TLP males.

Not reflected in Table 2, dual status youth (both males and females) had slightly higher recidivism rates at one-year post-release than corrections-only youth in this sample (42% vs. 38%), and among the TLP males ($n=46$), rates of recidivism for dual status youth were higher, at 55%, vs. 45%. However, these differences were not statistically significant.

4.1.3. Logistic regression analyses

To examine predictors of recidivism for the males only, we performed a step-wise logistic regression analysis. Although our dataset, excluding the females, includes a small number of cases ($n=61$), one rule of thumb suggests that a minimum of 60 cases for five independent variables is acceptable (Eliason, 2003). Thus, we limited the number of independent and control variables in the models to maximize the statistical power of the sample. As noted earlier, the covariates we selected (age, prior arrests, and race) are substantiated in the juvenile justice literature as key predictors of recidivism.

Table 3 provides the estimated coefficients for the step-wise logistic analysis of the male-only 2003 cohort. For the variables that showed statistical significance, we calculated percentage change estimates. Step 1 includes the control variables of age at admission, race, and number of prior arrests. In this model, only age at admission and prior arrests were statistically significant in predicting recidivism at one-year post-release. In terms of age, a one-year increase in age reduces the odds of recidivism by 43%. However, each additional prior arrest increases the odds of recidivism by 14%.

In Step 2, we added the TLP variable. Age at admission becomes marginally significant ($p \leq .10$) and prior arrests remain the only significant variable in this model at a similar rate to Model 1. TLP participation is not significant, although the coefficient indicates that TLP participation increases the odds of recidivism. Step 3 adds the CPS variable, which is also not significant. However, including CPS involvement eliminates prior arrests as a significant variable. Age at admission remains marginally significant at $p \leq .10$.

Step 4 includes an interaction term for age at admission and prior arrests. The interaction term is significant, indicating that the effect of age on recidivism is dependent on the number of prior arrests. Once this interaction is

Table 3
Estimated coefficients and percentage change of step-wise logistic regression models predicting recidivism — 2003 male cohort

Variable	Coefficient	Percentage change
Step 1		
Age	-.5611668**	-43%
Race	.3518597	
Prior arrests	.1334482**	14%
Step 2		
Age	-.5280604*	-41%
Race	.2985828	
Prior arrests	.1342481**	14%
TLP	.557428	
Step 3		
Age	-.6142266*	-46%
Race	.2476768	
Prior arrests	.0803422	
TLP	.0032341	
CPS	.0032341	
Step 4		
Age	.9284794	
Race	.066621	
Prior arrests	3.007976**	1900%
TLP	.6349762	
CPS involvement	-.0499064	
Age* prior arrests	-.1878301**	

Note: $N=61$; ** $p < .05$, * $p < .10$.

controlled for, the number of prior arrests emerges as the only significant independent variable affecting recidivism. Its effect is substantial. In this sample, for each increase in prior arrests, the odds of reconviction are 20 times greater (percentage change of 1900%).

Overall, the logistic regression analysis suggests that neither of the two independent variables significantly predicted recidivism outcomes. Rather, risk factors such as younger age, and particularly number of prior arrests, significantly increased the odds of being reconvicted for a crime within one-year post-release. The qualitative data detailed in the next section provides the context to further interpret these quantitative findings of null effects.

4.2. Qualitative analysis

4.2.1. Perceptions of TLP effectiveness

The TLP provides practice in independent living skills within the context of structure, supervision, and case management driven daily planning. When asked to describe the benefits of the TLP, both youth and staff emphasized the practical skills component of the program. For example, the youth appreciated the opportunity to develop very specific skills such as completing job applications, riding the bus, or learning how to set and follow through with a daily schedule. Nick, a young person who was confined for nearly three years because of his committing offense (criminal sexual conduct), described: “I learned I can do things on my own without needing someone else to give me a ride or be there to help me. So I can do things on my own, and I can make friends” (Interview, 8/9/04). In addition to these pragmatic independent living skills, TLP staff also perceived the program as successful in facilitating the development of trusting and supportive relationships with adults. Some of the youth also suggested that the relationships with TLP case managers were highly beneficial, describing the staff as “comforting”, “on my level” and “interactive”. However, as expected in an involuntary correctional program, views of the staff were varied and some youth resented staff’s position of power and authority over them.

In addition to practical and social skills, both youth and staff discussed the strong benefits of cognitive skills that are taught in the general program and reinforced during the youths’ six-week TLP stay. Examples of these cognitive skills, as explained by youth participants, included “thinking before reacting”, “learning to control impulses”, and “constructive problem solving”. For example, George, an 18-year-old father and former methamphetamine addict, stated:

So I mean, more so now, I think a lot more before I react... Cause I mean, I learned a lot about myself, about the people that I've hurt. There are a lot of kids who don't take the program seriously, and I think I took the program seriously to the best of my benefit (Interview, 7/17/04).

For the most part, staff also believed that the cognitive skills reinforced in the TLP cottage would help the youth to deal effectively with life situations and challenges on the outs. One staff member said, “...the guys, for six weeks, get to simulate what they’re going to get out of the program and what they’re going to do” (Interview, 5/12/2005). This quote illustrates the shared perception that the transition program provided the opportunity for youth to practice these cognitive skills in the context of real-life situations and interactions.

4.2.2. Skills used on the “outs” and experienced challenges

The youth who were interviewed in their post-release environments were asked to describe the skills learned in the cottage or the TLP that they were able to use in the community. The primary skill emphasized fell under the general theme of “refusal skills”, with “practical skills” constituting a secondary theme. The significance of these refusal skills is directly linked with the challenges that youth experienced in the community. While youth described an array of challenges ranging from job disappointments to conflicts with their girlfriends, by far the primary thematic content of these challenges revolved around “old friends and influences”. Under this category, the youth sample described struggling to navigate reintegration into their old networks, family, peer, and gang, without resorting to old behaviors, such as substance use or criminal activity. Ace, a 16-year-old father who was re-incarcerated shortly after his release, described his own cycle of negative influence that revolved around his old friends and influences:

I mean them (my old friends) are the only people I know, y'know what I mean, so boredom too, like if I get bored, I would stay home a lot, but if I didn't have work or anything, I'd just shoot over to my old neighborhood and walk by myself and then I see the old associates, so I go over there and start talking and y'know what I'm saying, we just more than talking and then just start hanging out again, and that was hard (Interview, 10/14/2004).

Like Ace, many of the youth were returned to their old environments and peer groups that, by and large, hadn't changed during their incarceration. To cope with these situations, they employed a number of strategies, including the refusal skills that they had learned in the correctional program. For example, Buddy, an 18-year-old African immigrant provided a good example of his refusal skills in practice:

If I'm with them <my friends> and there's a fight gonna happen right there, I will fight. I'm not gonna stop if somebody's hitting my cousin, I'm just standing right here and they jumpin' him. But if I'm in the house and they call me and they say yeah, we got to go to a fight right now, I'd say know, y'all go do your thing (Interview, 3/24/2005).

In this quote, Buddy describes his ability to selectively involve himself with old friends—yet to remove himself from a potentially dangerous situation. Other youth also employed refusal skills to minimize potential negative impact with drugs and alcohol, or with gang affiliated friends and family members.²

Staff perceptions of the major challenges of transition were largely similar to those that the youth actually described, as they also emphasized the potential criminal trappings of old friends, influences, peer groups and gangs. One staff explained that he used to attribute reentry failure to family dysfunction, but later realized that, "...every kid that I've had fail it was always with some guy they used to run around with you know almost 95% of the time it was the first couple of weeks" (Interview, 05/03/2005).

In addition to the challenges of old friends and influences, the youth also faced disappointments and challenges in finding jobs, enrolling in school, securing stable housing, or other logistical matters. These gaps in their reentry plans were commonplace. Ace, the youth respondent who was re-incarcerated shortly after his release, described his rapid cycle of job loss, issues with transportation, and housing instability that led to his self-described return to criminal activity. He stated:

Like I'd do anything to support [my daughter]. I mean, that's kind of how I got my <new> charge. I was selling drugs to make more money than I was making ...? (Interview, 11/24/04).

In this sample, these practical challenges were intensified for youth, like Ace, who had unstable living situations or who did not return to homes with caring adults or older family members. Blue, for example, left the facility at age 18 with vague plans of independent living and a strained relationship with his family of origin. Prior to his incarceration, he had resided with his grandfather on and off because of difficulties between he and his mother. Blue never successfully completed the TLP cottage and ended up hiding out with a drug dealer friend because, according to him, his living situation with his older brother had deteriorated. Within a few weeks of leaving TLP and without fulfilling the terms of his court order, he received a court order to serve another four to six months at the same facility.

4.2.3. Responsibility for change

One interesting angle to interpret these transition challenges is to examine youth and staff beliefs about what it takes to 'change' a criminal trajectory during the critical the reentry period. Overwhelmingly, the major theme expressed among the youth was that change is individual and largely "mental", in that offenders can change their course by focusing on their goals and sticking to their plan. This theme resonates well with the refusal skills that the youth also valued and practiced. For example, when asked about how much the program had helped him, Ace replied, "It's all up to the person. I mean, people can talk to you, they can tell you need to do this and this in the program...but it's really up to you" (Interview, 6/28/04). Another take on the theme of individual responsibility for change was expressed in terms of dealing with the consequences of your own actions. Caleb, a 15-year-old resident of a foster group home, suggested:

Cause that's the life <gang> that I chose. It's natural. If you gonna be a gang banger and you gonna be a thug, getting shot at and getting shot, and going to jail, that's part of what you becoming, so when it happens [you are arrested] you can't be mad if you chose to do it (Interview, 6/23/04).

This individual responsibility philosophy was highly congruent with the cognitive focus of the treatment they had learned and was also very much supported by staff, who talked about the "individual" ingredients for change such as "self-discipline, intelligence, confidence, and cognitive ability". However, the staff, even more than the youth, also recognized that change does not occur in a vacuum, and expressed the need for external supports that facilitate and

² This topic of old friends and influences is detailed in another paper recently published by the first author (Abrams, 2007).

promote success in transition, such as social support, housing, food, and solid families. One staff member worried that foster children have fewer social supports, and perhaps then less reason to exercise their ability to “do well” on the outs. He stated,

They <the youth> gotta have reason to want to get out of here...a focus at the end to see it worth it something to go home to something to which a lot of these guys don't even have. We've got enough guys that go to foster care, and they just gotta have something at the end to make it worth it. If they feel hopeless at the end they are not going to get much out of it all (Interview 5/12/2005).

The staff framed successful transition as both individual and environmental, and also believed in interconnectedness of these ingredients.

4.2.4. TLP gaps and weaknesses

Youth and staff expressed fairly disparate perceptions of the program's major weaknesses. In reflecting on the TLP several months after release, most of the youth respondents (with a couple of notable exceptions) felt that, all things considered, the cottage was an inefficient use of or “waste” of their time. One youth expressed frustration with the life skills training stating:

We ain't kids and all that. They think they ain't dealing with kids, man. You know, and to be honest with you, I don't need a library card... Its like they send you out into the community but they send you out to jump through hoops (Interview, 5/1/05).

While not all the youth who were interviewed concurred with the waste of time opinion, overall, regard for the TLP cottage and the skills learned tended to wane as time went on in their release.

Directly contrasting the youth findings, staff expressed frustration concerning the *insufficient* amount of time afforded to the program to provide adequate preparation for transition. For example, several staff members emphasized the need for more gradual transition due the discrepancies in experiences within the institution vs. the community environment. One case manager described:

I just don't think that [the staff] are given an opportunity to really get into what's going on with the kids. Whether that's the kid's fault because they're not disclosing or the system's fault for making people so busy with paperwork, they can't really get into stuff (Interview, 5/06/2005).

So while youth felt that the six weeks was too long for this program, the staff believed it not to be nearly enough time to help youth to prepare for the realities of reentry.

However, one key point of agreement between youth and staff was that youth did not receive necessary follow-up or aftercare services upon their release. For example, youth reported needing help in three key areas that the transition program targets—jobs, schooling, and housing—but did not necessarily know where to seek help. According to the program supervisor, TLP case managers were ideally supposed to maintain contact with released youth twice a month for two months. However, when asked about participating in aftercare, the youth did not sense a strong aftercare presence and felt “cut off” after they left the facility. C.J., a 16-year-old offender, stated:

I don't like to build relationships like that <with staff> where you live with someone for almost a year and then it's just like... you're done! You're on your own (Interview, 4/2/05).

With one notable exception where a case manager made significant attempts to keep in touch with his caseload during aftercare, staff mainly corroborated the youths' view concerning the lack of aftercare continuity. They advocated for longer periods of follow-up with the youth, a more gradual transition, and stronger linkages with social services, education, and pro-social activities in the community.

5. Discussion

Common wisdom would suggest that an intensive transitional living program for incarcerated youth would help to increase the odds of a successful community reentry. As other scholars argue, the skills learned in a correctional facility will do little unless they are highly relevant to real-life settings and situations and continue to be reinforced in the community (Abrams, 2006; Steinberg et al., 2004). Using a sole quantitative indicator of post release success, this

study found that participation in a six-week transitional living program did not make a significant difference in recidivism outcomes at one-year post-release, and in this case, the TLP participants were slightly more likely to be reconvicted of offenses than non-program participants. This finding echoes other studies of the IAP model that find recidivism rates essentially unaffected by programs that teach youth to adjust to gradual independence through transitional living programs and follow-up care (Frederick & Roy, 2003, June; Wiebush et al., 2005). The factors that did drive recidivism rates in this study, age at admission and number of prior arrests, were unrelated to program participation. These risk factors support other literature on recidivism risks with larger samples (Brent & Tollett, 1999; Heilbrun et al., 2000; Myner et al., 1998; Niarhos & Routh, 1992.) Additionally, while dual status youth had slightly higher recidivism rates than corrections-only youth within the TLP sample in particular, this variable did not emerge as a significant risk factor in either bivariate or multivariate significance tests.

The qualitative component of this study provides the context to understand the benefits and limitations of a transitional living program for incarcerated youth. Despite unchanged recidivism rates, both youth program participants and staff found the TLP to be highly beneficial in several ways. Youth reported gaining specific practical skills that support independence, especially with goals related to vocation and education. Youth and staff also believed that the opportunity to develop positive relationships with adults and to reinforce cognitive-based refusal skills in a supportive setting helped youth to better navigate the challenges of reentry.

While youth largely bought into the individual, cognitive-based philosophy of the correctional program and the TLP reinforcements, they experienced many challenges related to transition that tested the efficacy of their program lessons. These challenges revolved around associations with old friends and influences and also with practical and logistical gaps in their reentry plans. Although youth found they were able to use the mental preparation they received in many situations, elements of their largely unchanged community environments still tested their resolve to stay away from crime. For some of the youth who we followed longitudinally in the community, re-incarceration happened quickly following their release.

So what might explain some of the gaps between perceptions of the TLP benefits (by youth and staff) and its measured effects? As discovered by the qualitative data, the main issue in this particular case was found in the lack of continued ties between the transition program and aftercare. Although the facility had adopted the IAP model which involves some degree of aftercare, both youth and staff agreed that strong aftercare links did not exist, and according to the staff, the duration of the TLP intervention did not appear to permit for relationships and skills gained to be sustained for long periods of time. Although the youth nearly universally confronted changes in their reentry plans, they didn't know who to turn to for help with these complications. It seems that in the cottage-transition program-aftercare continuum, the third part of this sequence was the least apparent. This finding provides insight into the null effects on recidivism in this study and other studies of similar programs and indicates the need to develop much stronger aftercare and follow-up components. Follow-up and aftercare services may be especially important for the unique needs of dual status youth with a history of interrupted relationships or placement instability.

6. Implications

This study is non-experimental, and thus is limited in terms of understanding whether or not participation in the TLP actually made a difference in terms of recidivism rates. A small sample from one program year does not give a full picture of how the TLP fared after two or three post-implementation. Moreover, other indicators of transition success, such as school entry or job readiness, or were not explored. The quantitative data were mostly reliable. However, the child welfare involvement (CPS) variable was extracted from records, rather than from the state administrative data, and we were unable to separate past and current dependency status. For these reasons, we might not have captured the significance of this variable on recidivism outcomes. Finally, our dichotomized race variable might have missed differences between racial sub-groups.

Despite these limitations, this mixed methods study provides an interesting snapshot of this particular program and several ideas about how to strengthen transition and reentry programs for youth who are exiting residential care. One key point raised by this study is the significant challenges that youth face in regard to their refusal/cognitive skills, and also in regard to unexpected gaps or failures in their reentry plans. This finding speaks to the limitations of programs that operate primarily at the individual cognitive level as well as the need for ongoing case management and aftercare to build on both treatment and transition services. Aftercare can play a significant role in modeling positive relationships and reinforcing skills in the context of real-life situations, interactions, and relationships. In addition, extended

programming can help youth to problem solve problems that come up in regard to school, work, or stable housing. Youth in this study clearly struggled to retain their skills learned in a correctional context far removed from everyday challenges experienced in unchanged environments. Providing offenders with continued support in translating skills to real-world settings may be the next challenge for juvenile justice and community-based programs for the reentry population.

In terms of how to best target reentry services, the quantitative data in this study show that accounting for TLP participation, younger youth and those with more prior arrests were at higher risk of recidivism. While this finding is not surprising, it does indicate that youth with these specific risk factors may need even more supervision and/or supports upon their reentry into the community. For dual status youth, their risks for poor outcomes may be even higher due to instability in family structure and living situation. It is important that child welfare researchers and practitioners maintain awareness of the possibly unique transition challenges of the dual status population. More research is needed in regard to dual status youth in general—including how many dual status youth exist, their specific needs, and their outcomes in relation to corrections-only youth. Moreover, the qualitative portion of this study found that both youth and staff attributed increased transition stress and disruption to the absence of a stable adult. This variable should be explored for both its independent and interaction effects with dependency status.

Finally, providing insight into the needs of youth who transition in and out of any public system of care, these study findings reinforce the vulnerability of these youths to negative outcomes and to disappointments and challenges that impede their progress toward independence. These youth appear to need a great deal of guidance and formal supports to make healthy transitions between institutions and communities, and to reach independence as young adults and for some, as fathers. The growing body of research on transition age youth (Osgood, Foster, Flanagan, & Ruth, 2005) notes many similarities and overlaps between youth who are incarcerated, involved in the child welfare system, and who are homeless. It is incumbent upon child welfare researchers to pay close attention to these linkages between populations, as well as notice programmatic innovations in juvenile justice or other systems of care that may aid vulnerable youths' adaptation to adulthood and independence more generally.

7. Conclusion

Although researchers are finding that transitional living programs for incarcerated youth, are making little dent in the main outcome goal of reduced recidivism, future research should also examine other indicators of transition success, such as educational or vocational engagement. These intermediate outcomes may provide more insight into factors lead to subsequent incarceration. Moreover, future empirical study is needed to test the idea that stronger aftercare programs will produce more positive results. Our qualitative data suggest that aftercare may be the missing link in meeting the needs of these youths, yet rigorous testing of this hypothesis does not exist. As decades of research on foster care show, abrupt transitions to independence for youth upon reaching age of exit produces detrimental outcomes. Transferring this knowledge to a similar population, it is incumbent upon those concerned with the welfare of children to better understand and attend to the needs and environmental obstacles experienced by the youth reentry population.

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