

Reentry Services: An Evaluation of a Pilot Project in Clay County, MN

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Executive Summary

Program and goals

The Reentry Services Project (RSP) in Clay County, MN began in July 2003 with funding from the Minnesota Department of Public Safety Office of Drug Policy and Violence Prevention and matching funds from the Clay County Joint Powers Collaborative (a collaborative group of local human service agencies). The RSP aimed to improve public safety by assisting youthful offenders in successful community reentry following out-of-home placement. The program included the addition of two Transitional Coordinators (TCs) who worked with Probation Officers (POs) and community-based service providers to identify case specific needs and employ comprehensive case management services. Specifically, the RSP sought to reduce the likelihood of further crime and delinquency by providing comprehensive reentry case management to aid youth in:

- Obtaining and maintaining long-term employment, if appropriate,
- Maintaining a stable residence,
- Addressing substance abuse issues,
- Addressing physical and mental health issues, and
- Establishing a meaningful and supportive role in the community.

RSP was designed to begin at least 30 days prior to release from out-of-home placement, and to continue for six months following release to the community. The program served 124 youth during its first 4 years of operation.

Evaluation

Evaluators from North Dakota State University's Department of Criminal Justice and Political Science were contracted with to conduct a comprehensive evaluation of the RSP

program. Evaluation data were generated through several techniques, including stakeholder interviews and surveys, a thorough review of program materials, and an examination of service related data from the Court Services Tracking System (CSTS) and paper files maintained by POs and TCs. Process, intermediate outcome, and recidivism indicators were recorded for youth served by the RSP and a group of similar youth returning from placement without reentry services (Becker County, MN).

The evaluators provided quarterly, annual, and cumulative grant reports (i.e., a technical report for the first 2 years of program operation, this report covering the full 4 years of program operation) to the Minnesota Department of Public Safety Office of Drug Policy and Violence Prevention. In addition the evaluators presented quarterly reports examining program processes and outputs to the Joint Committee for the Restorative Justice Program and Re-entry Services Project, a advisory group consisting of 29 representatives from 24 local agencies, including the local court system, county commission, schools, law enforcement, social services, mental health, and other human service agencies.

Youth Profile

This report includes information on 92 RSP youth whose files were closed as of April, 2007. The average (mean) age of youth served during this period was 16.3 years upon return to the community following their most recent out-of-home placement. Of the 92 youth, 72% were male. Half (50%) were White, 26% were Native American or Alaskan Native, 22% Hispanic, and 2% African American. RSP youth averaged 4.2 official contacts with juvenile justice authorities prior to program participation, 38% had a prior felony charge, and 54% had a prior person-related crime (i.e., violent offense charge). On average, RSP clients had been on

probation for 18 months prior to returning to the community following their most recent placement. RSP clients experienced an average of 3.4 prior out-of-home placements and had spent 197 days in placement, including 173 days in restrictive placement.

Nearly all (98%) RSP youth were on indefinite probation, and most (60%) were on maximum or intensive probation supervision. Many RSP youth had extensive histories of problems, such as substance abuse (77%), histories of violence (65%), mental health issues (74%) and school problems (88%). More than three-quarters (76%) had experienced three or more of these problems, and more than half (54%) could be considered dual diagnosis (history of both substance abuse and mental health issues).

Program Process and Outputs

Process and output results clearly indicate that the RSP was implemented as intended. This is an exception to the general profile in the literature, which points to implementation difficulties of many aftercare pilot programs. For example, TC assignment (while not always in complete compliance with original time tables) generally occurred prior to release from placement, assessments were completed as scheduled, individualized case plans were developed, and a number of community-based service referrals were made. Furthermore, the content of transitional case plans and types of service referral matched the primary areas of risk/need identified in the intake YLS/CMI (e.g., emphasis on education, employment, substance abuse). The program (with the addition of TCs) increased the amount of contact with youth, parents, and agency partners, and TC time with youth was approximately evenly shared between surveillance and mentoring related activities. Finally, surveys of POs, agency partners, youth, and parents suggested that the program was implemented as designed and that key stakeholders had a favorable impression of the program. For example, on a 5 point scale (where 1 = not at all

satisfied” and 5 = “very satisfied), average PO satisfaction ranged from 4.30 to 4.70 on factors including intake procedures, frequency and nature of client referral to community-based service agencies, and the division of responsibilities between POs and TCs . Agency Partner satisfaction ranged from 4.20 to 4.60 on a number of items related to timing and quality of referrals from RSP staff and frequency, nature, and quality of communication with RSP staff.

Intermediate Outcomes

The RSP was successful in achieving case plan compliance goals, a reduction in YLS/CMI risk/needs scores, and a improvement in strengths scores. RSP youth completed 74% of the case plan tasks assigned by TCs and POs (virtual completion of the 75% goal). While the changes in risk/need (12% reduction) and strengths scores (17% increase) were slightly lower than program goals (20% reduction and 20% increase, respectively), they were substantial, and represent significant changes in known correlates of recidivism. In addition, more than half (60%) of RSP youth who received both assessments experienced a reduction in risk from return to the community to six months post-return, and the reduction met the goal set by program designers (20% or greater) for 43% of youth. Among youth with both assessments, 44% experienced an increase in strengths, and that increase met the goal set by program designers (20% or greater) for 41% of youth. In addition, youth followed through on the majority (60%) of community-based service referrals.

Furthermore, the YLS/CMI domains with the largest changes, the transitional plan domains with the greatest compliance rates, and the follow through rates on service referral tended to be in the areas indicating the greatest risk/need on the intake YLS/CMI (e.g., employment, education, substance abuse). There were also indicators of positive change for youth both during the program and up to 12 months after they completed the program. Staff

perception of youth status showed signs of improvement over time in each domain examined, including education, employment, substance abuse, mental health, family, housing, and prosocial support.

Recidivism of Program Participants

The majority of youth completed the RSP without incident, experiencing no technical probation violations (57%), no new official contacts (61%), and no criminal contacts (71%); however about half of youth (53%) did experience a new placement during participation in the program. During the entire follow-up period (average 28 months), 40% of RSP youth remained offense free, half (50%) of youth experienced no new criminal contacts, 39% experienced no technical probation violations, 30% experienced no new placements, and half experienced no long term placement. When placements did occur, they were most often the result of technical probation violations (e.g., failure to follow rules of probation, failure to attend school or treatment services). New offending was mainly isolated incidents involving misdemeanor and property related offenses, although a small number of youth experienced several later contacts or contacts for more serious behavior.

RSP Service and Outcomes Relative to Comparison Group

Services received, intermediate outcomes, and long term (recidivism) outcomes were compared between the 92 RSP youth and a group of 92 youth returning from placement without reentry services in a neighboring county (Becker County, MN). An examination of background characteristics indicated that the two groups were not significantly different in terms of age, gender, most recent placement type, YLS/CMI risk/need score, history of person-related offending, or percent of youth experiencing multiple problems. In general the data indicated that, while the groups are similar in many respects, the two groups exhibited significant initial

differences on several variables which can be expected to relate to the individual's propensity for reoffense (e.g., offense and placement history).

Relative to the comparison group (which included POs but did not include TCs), the RSP significantly increased contact between staff (TC and PO) and youth, their parents, and agency partners. The additional contacts provided by TCs represent a 346% increase in contacts with youth, a 194% increase in contacts with parents, and a 76% increase in contacts with agency partners, relative to the comparison group. RSP youth were significantly less likely to test positive for substances (35.5% of tests indicated substance use) than comparison youth (58.8% positive), even though they were more likely to be tested and were tested more frequently than youth in the comparison group.

Bivariate analyses indicated that, with a few exceptions, RSP youth experienced better recidivism outcomes than comparison youth. Specifically, RSP youth were less likely to spend time on adult probation, less likely to experience a later contact or official contact, and experienced less serious later contacts than comparison group youth. RSP youth experienced significantly fewer later official contacts and charges, were significantly less likely to experience a new long-term out-of-home placement, and spent significantly fewer days in placement and restrictive placement. These results point to the value of this type of program, which combines supervision and treatment, relative to programs which utilize only supervision.

Multivariate analyses examined whether these differences remained when we controlled for background characteristics and known predictors of recidivism. These results revealed that significant differences in number of official and criminal contacts per week at risk remained, controlling for age, race, gender, hometown, and number of prior charges. This strengthens the

findings above, which indicated the beneficial impact of RSP participation on a number of recidivism outcomes relative to the comparison group.

Subgroup analyses examined the possibility that RSP participation was differentially effective, by sorting out youth based on gender, age, race/ethnicity, hometown, offending history, and YLS/CMI risk/need category. These analyses found a relatively consistent pattern of beneficial impact related to RSP participation, and indicated that RSP participation may be particularly beneficial among some groups of youth. In addition, these analyses were consistent with the “risk” principle, suggesting that RSP may have more beneficial impacts among youth who are most at risk for reoffense. The impact of RSP on various subgroups of youth should be further investigated with a larger sample. If a larger sample were used and differential effectiveness were found, the RSP could be adapted to target certain select youth who are more likely to benefit.

Predictors of Recidivism Within RSP

The relationship between various service elements (e.g., transitional planning, referrals) and outcomes (likelihood of recidivism during follow-up) was examined within the RSP group to determine whether any specific program features were related to recidivism. Task assignment and completion, service referral and referral follow-through and level of contact between staff (TCs and total) were related to lower recidivism risk, as expected.

A number of program features were related to increased recidivism risk (including positive drug testing rate, level of contact with youth and agency partners, time spent in program, and time spent directly with TCs). The higher levels of some services experienced by the group who recidivated may reflect ongoing problems with the youth (i.e., misbehavior), or simply TC and PO recognition of the problems faced by these youth and their need for additional services.

On the other hand, the possibility exists that the impact of intensity or duration of RSP services may vary depending on youth characteristics (e.g., lower vs. higher risk). It is also possible that task and referral related features of the RSP program, while related to reduced recidivism overall, may be beneficial for some, but not all youth. Unfortunately, the size of the sample precluded further analysis of these hypotheses. If a larger sample were available and relationships were found between program features and youth characteristics, the RSP could be adapted to target youth with specific types (or varying intensities) of services.

The association between youth background characteristics and recidivism within the RSP group was also examined. The relationship observed between demographic characteristics, offending history, and social factors and outcomes among RSP youth are similar to those commonly found in recidivism research. RSP males, non-White youth, youth with more extensive and serious (as measured by whether youth had a prior felony charge) offending histories, those with higher YLS/CMI risk scores, and those with a history of substance abuse were more likely to recidivate than were RSP youth who were female, White, had less extensive or serious offending histories, those with lower risk scores, and those without a substance abuse history. Older RSP youth, those who experienced a prior person-related offense and those with a history of violence, mental health, and school problems were less likely to recidivate than were younger RSP youth, those with no prior person-related charges, and those with no history of violence, mental health, and school problems.

Sample size limitations restricted these analyses to bivariate correlations. It is quite possible, that certain program components (e.g., time in program, contact levels, referral completion rates) operate differently for various types of youth (e.g., those with a history of substance abuse). For example, transitional case plan tasks, referrals, and contact levels may

operate differently for high and low risk youth. Further research, with a larger sample, should examine these and other combinations of factors.

Cost- Benefit Analysis

A cost-benefit analysis was conducted by comparing program impact at four follow-up intervals (6 months post-release, and 1, 2, and 3 years post-release) to cost estimates related to juvenile justice processing in Clay County, MN. Program impacts were derived by comparing RSP and comparison group youth outcomes. Processing cost-estimates were obtained from Clay County Family Court Services personnel.

The analysis revealed that youth in the RSP experienced more technical violations, placements, and non-restrictive placement days than would be expected in the absence of the program (comparison group); however they experienced fewer minor and serious contacts, and fewer days in restrictive placement. As a result, reductions in processing costs attributed to the RSP (though fewer new official contacts and fewer days in restrictive placement) were partially offset by increased processing costs related to technical probation violations and non-restrictive placement costs.

RSP program costs (estimated at \$4,415 per youth) were partially recovered within the first year after release from placement, and were fully recovered within 2 years of release. Within 3 years of release from placement, the net benefit of the program was \$7,600 in reduced juvenile justice processing costs per youth. The primary factor driving reduced juvenile justice processing was the reduction in time in restrictive placement. Considering this “benefit” alone, the costs of the program (\$4,415 per youth) are offset if the program prevents an average of 24 days restrictive placement per youth. The data indicate that an average of 129 days of restrictive placement was avoided within the first 3 years after release. These data speak favorably about

the savings which were realized. When considered along with previously discussed impressive results about behavioral changes, the data definitely suggest that the program achieved impressive cost savings.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Results indicated that the RSP was implemented as intended, achieved numerous important intermediate outcomes, and that participation in RSP was related to lower recidivism relative to a comparison group who received only probation. RSP staff were successful in securing local funding to continue program operations for an additional year. This is reflective of earlier data (Section 3) which indicated widespread community agency support. The Clay County, MN Reentry Services Project has generated considerable respect which has led to its continuation being strongly endorsed. During the next year, staff will have the opportunity to more fully implement and/or modify the program. The results of the process and outcome evaluation pointed to areas where program staff could focus in order to more fully implement the RSP program design. Specifically:

- Earlier TC assignment and improvement in timing of assessment and transitional case planning to ensure continuity of services from placement to the community,
- Increased attention to survey completion, especially parent and youth surveys, and
- Further examination of the relationship between mental health needs and service provision, as some data suggested that there may be some youth with unmet mental health needs.

Based on the results of the process and program outcome evaluations, and research in the rehabilitation, aftercare and reintegration program literature, the evaluators have the following recommendations:

- The program should be expanded to accommodate TC assignment as early as possible, preferably upon entry into out-of-home placement,

- Systems should be devised to track placement related assessments and service receipt,
- Additional approaches to increase parental involvement should be explored,
- The focus on identifying and building strengths of participating youth should be intensified,
- Efforts should be made to maximize the value of community based services, particularly in the areas of cognitive-behavioral approaches, gender and culturally specific programming, and mental health services,
- Finally, data collection and analyses should continue. Sample size limited the ability to fully investigate the impact of RSP on various types of youth and the possibility that combinations of services may be predictive of success among certain groups. These issues should be explored in research with a larger sample.

Finally, it is vital that readers of this report keep in mind that the findings are influenced by the rigorous standards of statistical analysis. Many times the statistical formula yielded observations which were "statistically significant" and, therefore, indicated quite favorable conclusions about the achievement of program objectives. On other occasions, the statistical examinations generated results which satisfied the benchmark of "marginal significance." These latter results also indicated a favorable program impact, albeit at a somewhat muted level. The point being, both statistical parameters yield data which reveal a quality program; one which has achieved impressive results on several objectives. Combined with the cost savings this program has provided to the juvenile justice system of Clay County, MN; this particular Reentry Service Program warrants a very favorable cost-effective evaluation.