

Juvenile offenders often released into risky environments, study says

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Roughly 100,000 juvenile offenders are released each year from U.S. correctional facilities and reenter the community, but little research has been done on the types of neighborhoods they end up in, including the risks they face and the types of resources available to them.

A new study by researchers at the UCLA School of Public Affairs and the Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation's Prevention Research Center (PRC) helps fill this gap, measuring the rate of juvenile offenders released into each of Los Angeles County's 272 ZIP codes and examining specific neighborhood-level factors that could play a significant role in their reintegration or recidivism.

The study, funded by a grant from the National Institute on [Alcohol Abuse](#) and Alcoholism was recently published in the peer-reviewed [Journal of the Society for Social Work and Research](#).

Researchers examined reentry information for some 4,400 juvenile offenders who had served sentences in one of the county's 18 probation camps and who had been released in 2007. They found that reentry rates were greater in those ZIP codes characterized by higher levels of community violence (measured by per capita assaults) and greater densities of off-premise alcohol outlets and vacant housing. The study also found a greater rate of reentry in ZIP codes with lower levels of education services and [mental health services](#), including substance-abuse programs.

Previous research has shown that a high density of off-premise [alcohol outlets](#), including liquor stores, is associated with a variety of youth problems, as well as higher rates of adult crime, and that vacant housing is associated with increased rates of assaults among both youth and adults.

The researchers also found greater reentry rates in ZIP codes with higher levels of racial and ethnic minority residents — a finding that was not unexpected, researchers said, given the disproportionate numbers of poor and minority youth involved in all aspects of the juvenile justice system.

In a separate pilot study conducted in two Los Angeles County probation camps in 2007, 93 percent of youths surveyed said they planned to return to the same neighborhoods they lived in prior to incarceration. And studies conducted on juvenile corrections in various parts of the U.S. have found that over half, and even up to 70 percent, of released juvenile offenders return to the criminal justice system within two years of release. Given these findings, the authors suggest that more attention be focused on interventions that seek to alter the neighborhood structure in which reentry occurs.

"When neighborhood environments include a culture of violence, young people may be influenced to participate in violence as a means of survival or to protect themselves or their families," said study co-author Bridget Freisthler, an assistant professor of social welfare at the UCLA School of Public Affairs and an affiliated research scientist at the PRC. "If we want to influence the future behavior of these young people who have already been in trouble with the law, it may be much more effective to try to change these neighborhoods rather than trying to change the mindset of individual youth."

Such a shift — focusing more directly on how neighborhoods structure

opportunities for returning youth offenders rather than exclusively on individualized probation services for these offenders — would mark a fundamental change in the way probation departments and other social service providers approach the issue of youth reentering the community following incarceration.

Should Los Angeles County — home to the nation's largest juvenile probation system — invest further in neighborhood prevention approaches, researchers believe they could ultimately see a reduction in recidivism rates among area youth, as well as positive gains such as increased engagement in school and work.

While further research is required to test these hypotheses, study co-author Laura Abrams, a UCLA associate professor of social welfare, sees this study as a first step in better understanding how neighborhoods structure opportunities for returning youthful offenders.

"We are well aware of the fact that young people must overcome major challenges in order to be successful when they return to their community," Abrams said. "This study can help us reframe our prevention efforts to include the neighborhood environment in a more comprehensive approach."

More information: www.jsswr.org/article/view/5745

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