

**Community Re-Entry of Adolescents from New Jersey's Juvenile
Justice System**

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Introduction

Each year, approximately 1,600 adolescents who have been adjudicated delinquent return home from a court-ordered out-of-home placement in either a secure or residential facility operated by New Jersey's Juvenile Justice Commission (JJC). These youth, who have typically been away from home for 6 to 12 months, face an array of individual, family, school, and community obstacles that they will need to overcome in order to lead productive, law-abiding lives. For most, the re-entry challenges will be overwhelming. The majority will be re-arrested and re-convicted for new crimes committed after they were released. Many will be subsequently committed to a new term in a JJC facility or in an adult prison.¹

All of the adolescents released from JJC facilities are released to some form of juvenile justice system supervision and support. Youths committed to the care and custody of the JJC by a family court judge are released to the JJC's Division of Parole and Transitional Services. Some committed juveniles are released prior to the completion of their maximum term by the Parole Board. Other committed juveniles complete their maximum term and are released to a term of post-incarceration supervision that can extend up to one-third of the maximum incarcerative term.² Juveniles placed in a JJC residential facility as a condition of probation are released to the probation department in the family court vicinage from which they were sentenced.

For all of these youngsters, those under the authority of the JJC's Division of Parole and Transitional Services and those under the authority of a probation department, the challenges of re-entry are numerous. Many will return to dysfunctional families and neighborhoods rife with drugs, crime, and violence. Others will return to schools where they have only experienced failure. Older adolescents may return with the goal of transitioning to the adult world of work. For parole and probation officers, the challenge is to guide adolescents making these transitions by balancing surveillance (the law enforcement function) with support (the social work function) in order to maximize the odds that each returning adolescent will succeed. It is a daunting challenge.

¹ Re-involvement with either the juvenile or criminal justice system is not regularly monitored for adolescents returning home from JJC facilities, but studies that have tracked samples of youths released from JJC facilities have consistently found high recidivism rates. For example, an April, 2001 JJC study compared post-release outcomes of all adolescents released from the Wharton Tract Stabilization and Reintegration Program between February, 1997 and August, 1999 to the outcomes for all committed youths released from all other JJC facilities during the same time period. That study found that within two years of release 80% and 86% of the Wharton Tract and other facility youths, respectively, had been re-arrested, 68% and 76% were convicted of new crimes, and 37% and 50% were sentenced to a new term in either a JJC facility or an adult prison.

² The provision for post-incarceration supervision terms was included in the 1995 juvenile justice reform initiative. The provision was intended to provide for post-release supervision authority for juveniles who are denied discretionary early release by the Parole Board and who "max-out," or serve their maximum term, in a JJC facility.

The JJC System

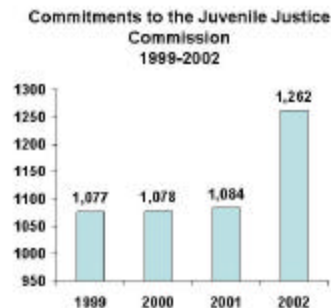
The JJC operates five secure correctional facilities and fifteen residential group centers that range in capacity from 10 to 40 beds.³ Additionally, the Department of Health and Senior Services and the JJC contract for the use of 77 beds in five licensed community-based substance abuse treatment centers.⁴ Juveniles who are committed to the JJC under the provisions of N.J.S.A. 2A:4A-43b(16b) may be housed in either a secure or residential program, at the discretion of the Executive Director of the JJC. Committed juveniles may be initially assigned to a residential group center, may begin their term in a secure facility and be transferred to a residential group center, or may serve their complete term in a secure facility.

The release of all committed juveniles is subject to the provisions of the Parole Act and is determined by the Parole Board. Today, literally all committed juveniles have terms of post-incarceration supervision imposed, so that all committed juveniles – those that serve their maximum terms and those that the Parole Board releases prior to the completion of their maximum terms, are released to the jurisdiction of the JJC’s Division of Parole and Transitional Services.

Probationers may be placed in a JJC residential group center as a condition of their probation with the approval of the JJC. The release of these residentially placed probationers is not subject to the provisions of the Parole Act and is typically made on a case by case basis, taking into account each program’s assessment of whether a juvenile is ready for release (i.e., whether they have been “rehabilitated”). The JJC has no involvement in the post-release supervision of these probationers. Instead, they are supervised by the probation department in the family court vicinage from which the juvenile was sentenced.

Committed Adolescents

All committed adolescents are received by the JJC at the new Juvenile Reception and Assessment Center, where they undergo a comprehensive physical, psychological, educational, vocational, and risk assessment. The information collected at this facility is the best information available regarding adolescents committed to the JJC and will be used here to describe the re-entry population, despite the fact that the information has been collected at the “front door,” as juveniles enter the JJC, and not at the “back door,” as juveniles are leaving the JJC. It is also important to



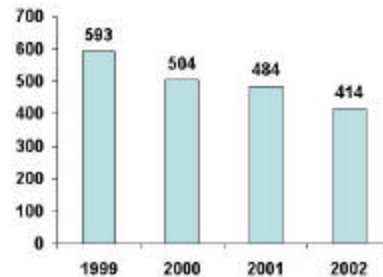
³ The Wharton Tract Stabilization and Reintegration Program (commonly referred to as the “boot camp,”) is classified as a secure facility even though it does not have a secure perimeter because it is staffed by corrections officers. One of the residential programs, Edison Prep, is run by a private, non-profit under contract with the JJC.

⁴ Ten of these treatment beds are dedicated to juveniles who have undergone substance abuse treatment and have relapsed.

note that this information is not reflective of juveniles who are returned to the custody of the JJC on the basis of a technical violation of parole.⁵ In 2002 there 279 adolescents returned on the basis of a technical parole violation.

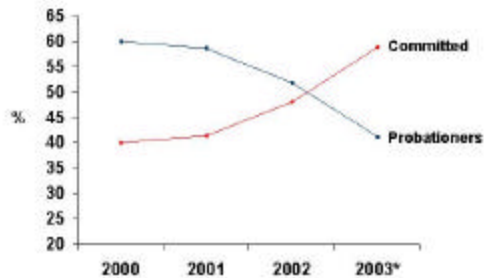
In 2002, 1,262 adolescents were committed to the JJC. This number represents a 16 percent increase over the number of adolescents committed to the JJC in 2001 (1,084). This increase in the number of adolescents under the care and custody of the JJC under commitment status has been partially offset by a decrease in the number of adolescents placed in JJC residential programs as a condition of probation. The latter number has been steadily decreasing since 1999. The number of probationers in JJC residential programs in 2002 (414) was 30 percent less than the comparable number from 1999 (593).

Number of Probationers Placed in JJC Residential Programs 1999-2002



This trend of the JJC handling increasing numbers of adolescents on commitment status and decreasing numbers of adolescent probationers is best illustrated by examining the average daily population of JJC residential facilities. In 2000, 60 percent of the adolescents in JJC residential facilities were probationers and 40 percent were committed to the custody of the JJC by a family court judge. Based on the data from the first four months of 2003, by the end of 2003 those percentages are projected to be reversed.

Status of JJC Residential Program Populations 2000 - 2003*



* Includes data from January through April

The decrease in residential probationers which has, in part, offset the increase in committed adolescents could be attributable to one or more of the following factors:

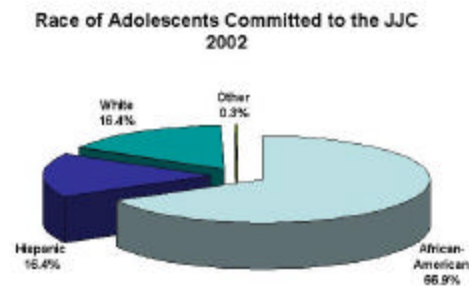
- judges committing adolescents they might previously have placed in a residential program as a condition of probation, or
- the JJC accepting fewer probationers as a way to cope with increasing numbers of commitments, or

⁵ Technical violations of parole are activities that would not be illegal but for their having been mandated as conditions of parole. Examples of technical violations include, but are not limited to, failing to continue reporting to one's parole officer, failing a drug test, and failing to participate in a mandated treatment program.

- changes in the practices of residentially placing probationers and committing adolescents that are unrelated.

It is impossible to know exactly what has led to these changes. There are, however, implications for adolescent re-entry. As a result of this trend, increasing numbers of juveniles have their date of release from a JJC facility controlled by the Parole Board. These adolescents return to communities from JJC facilities under the jurisdiction of the JJC's Division of Parole and Transitional Services. Absent an increase in the number of parole officers, caseloads will increase as the trend toward increasing commitments and decreasing probationers continues.

The overwhelming majority (93%) of adolescents committed to the JJC are male. While two percent of these youths are age 13 or younger, most (56%) are age 16 or 17 years. The average age of a youth committed to the JJC in 2002 was 17 years old. One quarter (25%) are age 18 at the time of commitment. Over two-thirds (67%) of committed youth are African-American, 16 percent are Hispanic, and 16 percent are white.



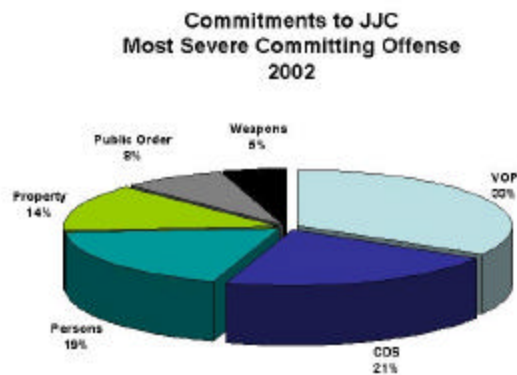
Only 6 percent of the adolescents committed to the JJC in 2002 were committed as a result of their first adjudication of delinquency – the other 94 percent had one or more prior adjudications. The average number of prior adjudications of delinquency was five. Nearly one-third (32.6%) of the adolescents committed to the JJC had previously been placed in a JJC residential or secure facility.

Number of Prior Adjudications of Delinquency
for Adolescents Committed to the JJC
2002

Number	Frequency	Percent
0 to 1	161	13.6
2 to 3	271	23.0
4 to 5	326	27.6
6 to 7	199	16.9
8 to 9	113	9.6
10+	110	9.3
Total	1180	100.0

The difficulty that returning adolescents have in successfully transitioning to community life is highlighted by the fact that a violation of parole was the most frequent reason for commitment among all youth committed to the JJC in 2002.

The most severe committing offense for one-third (33.7%) of adolescents committed to the JJC in 2002 was a technical violation of probation (VOP).⁶ The next most frequent reason (21.3% of all youth committed) was adjudication for a drug offense (CDS).



The overwhelming majority of adolescents committed to the custody of the JJC come from only a small number of counties. As the following table indicates, in 2002 Camden County alone was responsible for one out of every four adolescents committed to the JJC. Four counties, Camden, Essex, Hudson and Passaic, accounted for nearly six out of every ten (58%) adolescents committed to the JJC.

⁶ Technical violations of probation are analogous to technical violations of parole, i.e., violations of rules of supervision, not violations of a criminal statute.

Commitments to JJC
2002

	Number of Committed Youth	Percent of State Total	Cumulative Percent
Camden	326	25.8%	25.8%
Essex	154	12.2%	38.0%
Hudson	128	10.1%	48.2%
Passaic	126	10.0%	58.2%
Middlesex	98	7.8%	65.9%
Mercer	93	7.4%	73.3%
Union	65	5.2%	78.4%
Atlantic	61	4.8%	83.3%
Monmouth	39	3.1%	86.4%
Ocean	35	2.8%	89.1%
Salem	30	2.4%	91.5%
Burlington	25	2.0%	93.5%
Gloucester	18	1.4%	94.9%
Bergen	16	1.3%	96.2%
Sussex	10	0.8%	97.0%
Somerset	9	0.7%	97.7%
Morris	7	0.6%	98.3%
Cape May	6	0.5%	98.7%
Warren	6	0.5%	99.2%
Cumberland	5	0.4%	99.6%
Hunterdon	5	0.4%	100.0%
Total	1262	100.0%	

The fact that the majority of adolescents returning from a commitment to the JJC return to a limited number of geographical areas is further illustrated by examining the municipalities that these youth return to. Nearly fifty percent of the adolescents committed to the JJC return to five cities (i.e., Camden, Newark, Jersey City, Paterson, and Trenton).

Commitments to JJC
2002

Municipality	Number	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Camden	195	15.5	15.5
Newark	112	8.9	24.3
Jersey City	106	8.4	32.7
Paterson	96	7.6	40.3
Trenton	87	6.9	47.2
All Others	666	52.8	100.0

This geographic concentration of youths in a limited number of New Jersey cities has certain implications. From a purely resource allocation standpoint, it's clear that focusing resources in a limited number of cities will reach a majority of the youths returning from the JJC. This is a strategic advantage, particularly in a time of limited resources. On the downside, the cities to which the majority of JJC youths return present high levels of what are termed "community risk factors." These are conditions that are positively correlated with high levels of crime and violence and which increase the odds that the returning youths will become re-engaged in delinquent activity.

The concentration of crime, violence, poverty and unemployment in the communities to which the majority of JJC youth returns is a particularly vexing problem. Examples of the types of negative community conditions include the violent index offense rate (violent index offenses include homicide, rape, robbery and aggravated assault). In the above-referenced five cities there are 758 violent index offenses committed per 100,000 residents, a rate over three times the Statewide rate of 202 violent index offenses committed per 100,000 residents.⁷ The poverty rate in these five cities is 23,529 per 100,000, a level nearly triple the statewide poverty rate of 8,314 per 100,000. The unemployment rate in these five cities is nearly double the statewide rate.⁸

In addition to these community risk factors, returning youths typically have a plethora of individual and family risk factors, beyond their involvement with the juvenile justice system (which in and of itself is a strong risk factor for continued involvement). The JJC's newly created intake unit and assessment process for committed youth provides some information about these problems. Data for the 259 committed adolescents admitted during the first quarter (January through March) of 2003 indicate the following:

- 60% (155) had an indicated need for residential substance abuse treatment after a full substance abuse assessment
- 39% (100) had a history of DYFS involvement indicated in their record
- 15% (40) had a dual diagnosis (mental health/substance abuse) indicated
- 33% (86) were classified as having Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
- 26% (68) had a history of being prescribed psychotropic medication
- 26% (67) had a parent or caregiver who was ever incarcerated
- 22% (56) had a parent or caregiver with a history of drug abuse
- 57% (148) had one or more indicators of family problems (DFYS involvement, parent or caregiver incarceration or parent or caregiver substance abuse) present.

More specific information about the mental health status of adolescents committed to the JJC is available from a joint JJC/Columbia University/New York

⁷ Crime in New Jersey 2001, New Jersey State Police Uniform Crime Report

⁸ United States Census, 2000. Rates are based on total population.

State Psychiatric Institute study completed in 2001.⁹ In that study, Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders Diagnostic Interview Schedule for Children-IV (DSM DISC-IV) diagnoses were completed for a sample of 201 committed youth. The results of that study indicated that 63 percent of adolescents were classified into one or more of the DSM DISC-IV diagnostic categories. Just over one-third (34%) of the study sample was diagnosed as having more than one psychiatric disorder. A total of 16 percent had two diagnoses and an additional 16 percent had three or more diagnoses. The following table summarizes the diagnostic information for the study sample:

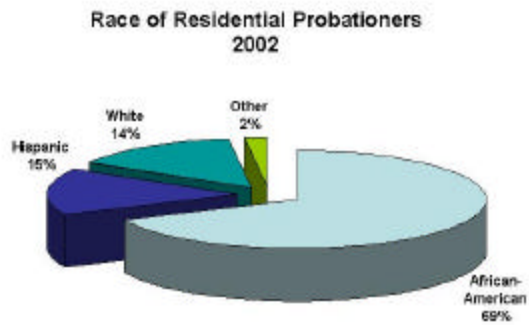
DSM DISC-IV Diagnoses for a Sample of
Youth Committed to the JJC
2001

Category(ies) Diagnosed	Number	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Substance Only	48	23.9%	23.9%
Substance & Disruptive	26	12.9%	36.8%
Anxiety Only	11	5.5%	42.3%
Disruptive Only	8	4.0%	46.3%
Anxiety & Substance	7	3.5%	49.8%
Affective & Substance	5	2.5%	52.2%
Affective Only	4	2.0%	54.2%
Anxiety, Affective & Disruptive	4	2.0%	56.2%
Anxiety, Affective, Substance & Disruptive	4	2.0%	58.2%
Anxiety & Affective	3	1.5%	59.7%
Anxiety, Substance & Disruptive	2	1.0%	60.7%
Affective, Substance & Disruptive	1	0.5%	61.2%
Anxiety & Disruptive	1	0.5%	61.7%
Affective & Disruptive	1	0.5%	62.2%
No Diagnosis	76	37.8%	100.0%
Total	201	100.0%	

Probationers in Residential Placement

Probationers who are placed in a JJC residential facility do not go through the same comprehensive intake assessment process that committed youth do. As a result, there is less information available about this group. As mentioned previously, their numbers are declining. Of the 414 probationers who were placed in a JJC residential facility in 2002, 95 percent (392) were male. The average age was 16.5 years, just 6 months younger than the average age of committed youths. Over two-thirds (69%) of residentially placed probationers were African-American. Fifteen percent were Hispanic and 14 percent were white.

⁹ Aloisi, Michael. "Exploratory Analysis of Administration of DISC-IV to Youth at NJTSB." Juvenile Justice Commission, Trenton, New Jersey, 2000.



As was the case for committed youth, a majority of residential probationers come from a limited number of counties. In fact, nearly two-thirds (63.5%) of all residential probationers came from just four counties – Essex, Camden, Union, and Monmouth. It is also interesting to note that those counties who place a proportionately high number of probationers in residential programs are not necessarily the same counties that commit a large number of adolescents to the custody of the JJC. While Essex and Camden counties both commit and residentially place large numbers of youth, Union and Monmouth have comparatively high residential placement rates for probationers, but not for commitment.

When released, these probationers will return to their home counties under the supervision of the probation department in that county. Often there will have been little or no interaction between the adolescent and his/her supervising probation officer while the youth has been in the JJC facility, particularly in cases where the adolescent has been in a facility that is far from the sending county. This transfer of jurisdiction for adolescents returning from the executive branch's JJC to the judicial branch's probation division leads to lack of continuity in case management and treatment.

Probationers Placed in JJC Residential Programs
2002

County	Number of Probationers	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Essex	93	22.5%	22.5%
Camden	66	15.9%	38.4%
Union	60	14.5%	52.9%
Monmouth	44	10.6%	63.5%
Mercer	39	9.4%	72.9%
Atlantic	35	8.5%	81.4%
Middlesex	14	3.4%	84.8%
Hudson	11	2.7%	87.4%
Passaic	10	2.4%	89.9%
Ocean	9	2.2%	92.0%
Cumberland	6	1.4%	93.5%
Gloucester	6	1.4%	94.9%
Somerset	6	1.4%	96.4%
Bergen	4	1.0%	97.3%
Morris	3	0.7%	98.1%
Warren	3	0.7%	98.8%
Hunterdon	2	0.5%	99.3%
Salem	2	0.5%	99.8%
Burlington	1	0.2%	100.0%
Cape May	0	0.0%	100.0%
Sussex	0	0.0%	100.0%
Total	414	100.0%	

Parole

The JJC's Division of Parole and Transitional Services is broken down into three regions (i.e., northern, central, and southern). As of May 9, 2003, there were 24 parole officers supervising 638 active cases statewide, resulting in an average caseload size of 26.6 youths. Caseloads for the regions ranged from 23.6 in the northern region, to 29.1 in the central region, and 27.2 in the southern region. The average length of time juveniles remain on parole is approximately 14 months.

In addition to fulfilling supervision responsibilities by conducting home visits, random drug tests, etc., each parole officer attempts to procure the particular services that will assist their charges' re-entry. Sometimes that means substance abuse treatment services, sometimes that means assistance with job placement – needs are based on each particular case. Since there is typically no separate funding for case specific services, parole officers scramble to procure services to the best of their ability.

In many counties parole officers are assisted by multi-disciplinary teams created by the county youth services commissions. The juvenile justice reform initiative of 1996 codified county youth services commissions and gave those commissions the responsibility to plan for the needs of at-risk and court-involved youth. The reform initiative also funded, at approximately \$10M per year, a State/Community Partnership Grant Program to fund the programs and services

necessary to operationalize each county's youth services plan. To varying degrees, counties dedicate a portion of those funds to youths returning from JJC placements. The degree to which counties focus on these needs and the degree to which the JJC fully avails itself of these resources is a point of contention between the JJC and county youth services commissions in some cases, however. To the extent that the JJC and county youth services commissions don't collaborate to provide re-entry services, the significant investment made in adolescents through secure or residential treatment services is not maximized.

Major Issues Affecting Re-Entry

- *The increasing prevalence of adolescents with psychiatric disorders under the jurisdiction of the JJC.*

This is a national problem and not unique to New Jersey. Ever increasing numbers of adolescents enter the juvenile justice system with psychiatric disorders that require mental health treatment services. The JJC has responded to this trend by increasing the specialized services available to this population – by creating a new secure treatment cottage and by increasing capacity of residential programs designed to treat these youths. The intersystem issues between juvenile justice and mental health remain serious, however, and particularly problematic for youths returning to communities. There are multi-system interventions that have been evaluated and been found to be effective with these populations. A multidisciplinary case management model called P.A.C.T. (Program for Aggressive Community Treatment) is one such program. Programs such as this are likely to have a significant impact, if implemented.

- *The prevalence and incidence of family and community risk factors.*

Despite whatever efforts are made to address the individual issues that each adolescent who is placed in a JJC facility might have, the majority have significant family issues and return to communities rife with guns, drugs, and violence. Some family-based treatment programs, such as multi-systemic therapy and functional family therapy, have been rigorously evaluated and been found to produce positive results. These programs, however, are very costly. The juvenile justice system has begun to pilot family-based treatment programs. These efforts should be supported and expanded.

- *The interrelationship between the JJC and DYFS.*

As the classification data indicate, many adolescents in JJC facilities are, or have been, under the supervision of DYFS. Access to DYFS residential programs is a source of frustration for family court judges and administrators of county juvenile detention centers, where adolescents awaiting a DYFS placement often reside. It also often poses difficulties for adolescents ready to leave a JJC placement who have no home to return to. This is particularly problematic for older, "aging out" adolescents. The reorganization and refocusing of DYFS presents opportunities to address this major intersystem issue.

These are some of the major issues and challenges that confront the juvenile justice system as it attempts to improve the outcomes for youths returning to communities from out of home placement in juvenile justice programs. Everything that is done to confront these challenges also takes place in the context of significant disparity. Some counties have an enviable array of programs and services to support court-involved youths. Other counties have few such services. There is an inverse relationship between need and services, such that the large urban counties with large numbers of court-involved youth, typically have the fewest resources to devote to those youth. Perhaps as a result, who is sent to juvenile justice facilities, and thus who returns from those facilities, varies significantly between counties. Tragically, the overrepresentation of minority youth in the deep end of New Jersey's juvenile justice system remains a significant problem and poses unique challenges broadly, and for re-entry services particularly.