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Abstract

In this article, the author explores the significance of “exits” for juvenile male offenders who are preparing to leave correctional institutions. The analysis focuses on practical and cognitive exit strategies, anticipated challenges, and future visions based on qualitative interviews with 20 juvenile males (ages 15–17 years) from two correctional facilities in the upper Midwest region of the United States. At the juncture of exit, all of the youth were involved in practical preparation for reentry and shared an emphasis on the theme of “individual responsibility” for their futures. However, the cognitive strategies they used to prepare for exit were strongly differentiated by level of motivation or expressed “openness” to change. Youth who had little motivation to change tended to deny the potential challenges associated with their return to the community, whereas those who expressed a greater openness to change were contemplating how to achieve an alternative, law-abiding future while realistically considering the potential pitfalls of crime temptations. Ambivalence about change was the most common pattern, expressed as a desire to move toward desistance but lacking the internal confidence or sense of social support to achieve such change. From these findings, implications for theory and practice are proposed.

Keywords

youth offenders, exiting care, identity, desistance

Juvenile offending is a global problem and according to best available estimates, approximately 1,000,000 youth are detained worldwide (Pinheiro, 2006). The United States has the world’s largest prison population, including for juveniles (Walmsley,

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2003). On any given day, nearly 90,000 youth (ages 12-21 years) are confined to institutions such as group homes, residential treatment centers, or correctional facilities (Sickmund, Sladky, Kang, & Puzanchera, 2008). The vast majority of these confined youth are older (81% are between 15 and 20 years of age), male (85%), and members of ethnic minority groups (64%; Sickmund et al., 2008).

Most incarcerated youth will eventually return to their homes and communities after months or years of confinement during which their lives have been highly structured and monitored. In addition to coping with this newfound freedom, youth who return to the community following incarceration may experience a shift in their personal and social identities as they attempt to transition to a law-abiding lifestyle. Although some youth will meet the challenges associated with these multiple transitions, many more will not. Research has indicated that more than 50%, and even up to 85% of released juveniles will reoffend within 1 to 5 years of release (Lipsey, 1999; Trulson, Marquat, Mullings, & Caeti, 2005). Documented educational and employment outcomes for formerly incarcerated youth are also bleak. One study of more than 500 released juvenile offenders in the state of Oregon found that after 1 year post release, only 30% were engaged in work or school (Bullis & Yovanoff, 2002). Moreover, in a review of empirical research, Osgood, Foster, and Courtney (2010) reported that fewer than 20% of formerly incarcerated youth in the United States go on to earn a high school diploma or an equivalent educational certification.

Several scholars have sought to understand the experience of transition and reentry for incarcerated youth. These studies have found that a young person's goals can be compromised by a host of logistical and social factors. Some of the major challenges are practical, such as lack of access to housing, schooling, or employment conditions that support a stable transition (Chung, Little, & Steinberg, 2005). Other challenges are embedded in the social nuances of reentry. For example, released youth often struggle to avoid associations with their friends and family members who may be criminally involved but who also comprise their main sources of social support (Abrams, 2007; Sullivan, 2004). Some youth may contend with these barriers by drawing on internal strengths and engaging prosocial support systems (Todis, Bullis, Waintrup, Schultz, & D'Ambrosio, 2001) or by selectively engaging with delinquent friends or risky activities (Abrams, 2007). Nevertheless, as recidivism studies have consistently indicated, the majority of released youth are unable to overcome these transition hurdles (Lipsey, 1999; Trulson et al., 2005).

Related to the experience of reentry, a body of theory and research on desistance from crime among youth offenders suggests that "openness to change" can facilitate a series of cognitive shifts that allow for prosocial lifestyles and identities to evolve over time (Giordano, Cernkovich, & Rudolph, 2002). However, scant research has examined exits from juvenile corrections as a potentially significant piece of this larger process of movement toward desistance. In this article, the author analyzes qualitative interviews conducted with juvenile male offenders at the juncture of release to develop an understanding of these exits from the vantage point of young people themselves. Three main research questions are posed:

Research Question 1: How do youthful male offenders prepare themselves, practically and cognitively, for exit from juvenile corrections?

Research Question 2: How do youthful male offenders envision their futures as they prepare for exit?

Research Question 3: How does motivation to change shape these preparation strategies and future goals?

Background and Theory

Prior discussion on preparation for exit from correctional care has largely centered on discharge planning and practical concerns. Exiting a residential institution such as a juvenile correctional facility or a group home typically involves planning for family reunification and housing, school reentry and placement, financial support, and medical costs and coverage (Trupin, Turner, Stewart, & Wood, 2004). In correctional facilities more specifically, literature on best practices has recommended transition planning that begins at least 60 days prior to release and that includes the implementation of an individualized and specific reentry plan that follows youth through their postrelease probation phase. Ideally, transition planning should also include a “step down” or phased transition to prepare the young person for release (Altschuler & Armstrong, 2002).

Concrete and phased transition plans are very relevant to the overall goal of youth offender rehabilitation. However, leaving a residential institution can also constitute a major event for youth in other ways (Brearley, 1982). Young people may experience departure from the confines of a residential or correctional facility as a significant loss, as the staff and peers of the institution may have become in some sense a new family system. In addition, leaving a facility poses the challenge of bridging potentially incongruent social and interpersonal worlds (Phelan & Davidson, 1998). As the norms and structure of a correctional institution are likely quite different from the outside worlds of families, schools, and communities, youth who are in the process of exiting care must take pause to reconcile who they have been, who they are now, and who they want to become (Abrams & Hyun, 2009).

How do young people experience this “exit” process? What theories can be used to frame and understand this potentially significant departure? Focusing on the underlying processes involved in various types of exits, sociologist Helen Ebaugh (1988) theorized the meaning of becoming an “ex,” meaning the process of abandoning a formerly held conception of self and social position in favor of a new identity or a role. For individuals involved in major transitions, such as a divorce or leaving a job, this process is characterized by various stages of change, including a period of instability before a sense of equilibrium is reestablished. Moreover, to establish a secure new sense of self, a process of “disengagement” from a formerly held social role must precede the learning and adopting of new identity possibilities. The disengagement process occurs on both individual and group levels—the individual must be able to detach from his or her former role and still the surrounding social environment must accommodate the individual’s quest for change.

Although not written specifically about offenders or young people, Ebaugh's (1988) role exit theory resonates to some extent with theories of criminal desistance and more specifically, those that focus on the cognitive aspects of offender rehabilitation. Much discussion in criminology has centered on the role of structural and social factors versus cognitive or "agentic" factors in shaping patterns of desistance from crime (Laub & Sampson, 2001; LeBel, Burnett, Maruna, & Bushway, 2008; Mulvey et al., 2004). The author takes the view that desistance is a dynamic interplay between internal and external factors. However, based on the cross-sectional data analyzed, this analysis focuses on the cognitive aspects of such change rather than on the social bonds or external events that may facilitate or inhibit personal will or action toward desistance over time.

Criminologists have theorized that motivation to adopt a new identity—one that gradually does not involve offending associations and activities—is a fundamental component of desistance (Maruna, 2001; Shover, 1996). Giordano et al.'s (2002) study of the narratives of women and men who were formerly incarcerated in a state juvenile correctional facility laid out a comprehensive theory of "cognitive transformation." This theory is distinct from the "transtheoretical stages of change" model developed in the substance abuse field (Prochaska & Velicer, 1997), which criminologists and addictions scholars alike have criticized for lack of complexity, evidence, and measurement stability, among other weaknesses (Casey, Day, & Howells, 2005; West, 2005). Giordano et al. suggested that the process of desistance is preceded by motivation or openness toward change—which they describe as a "necessary, but not sufficient," condition for desistance. This motivation must be accompanied by the experience of various "hooks," such as job or stable living environment that provides a social context and a basis to achieve the desired change. Giordano et al. also theorized that through these hooks for change, the development of a "replacement" self, meaning an alternative to an offending identity, can evolve. Eventually, the ability to view the past and one's crime in a different light will follow. According to this theory, openness to change is a first step in a long process that may not be entirely linear but that may progress toward desistance depending on numerous factors, including elements of the social environment and opportunities.

Although these role exit and desistance theories offer frameworks to understand a larger process of identity change, it is also important to understand the intermediate steps or the nuances of desistance that may be involved in these longer term trajectories. The period of exit from incarceration, when youth offenders are preparing to face the realities of their newfound freedom and their old environments, can be viewed as a potentially critical juncture in the movement toward desistance from offending and crime. However, exits from correctional care have not been previously examined in this way. In this article, the author analyzes exit narratives of 20 juvenile male offenders who are preparing to leave correctional facilities to explore the meanings and strategies associated with these exits from their own point of view. The analysis centers on offenders' articulated sense of openness to change and its bearing on their strategies to cope with the anticipated challenges of life "on the outs."

Method

This article stems from a larger ethnographic study that sought to examine the context of correctional facilities for youthful male offenders and the process of identity formation occurring through the treatments offered in these institutions. This 4-year study included repeat observations of the day-to-day workings of three juvenile correctional facilities as well as a series of qualitative interviews with facility residents and staff. Prior articles from this research have examined the tensions between treatment and correctional philosophies (Abrams, Kim, & Anderson-Nathe, 2005), the reentry process (Abrams, 2007), and youths' views of treatment and reentry programs according to facility context (Abrams, 2006). For this article, data analysis focused on two of the three facilities studied¹ and closely examined the qualitative interviews conducted with the young men just prior to their facility exit. The author's intent was to use this rich data to focus in depth on the exit experience, rather than to make any predictions about the relationships between exit strategies and potential outcomes.

Study Sites

Data collection took place at two study sites: "Wildwood House" and "Seven Acres Camp,"² both located in the upper Midwest region of the United States. The facilities housed similar populations of males aged 14 to 18 years whose criminal records included felony-level and/or repeat offenses. The facilities were also quite similar in their approach to care, offering a number of specialized treatment services such as individual, group, and family therapies as well as social skills groups and recreational and vocational opportunities. These treatment activities were rooted in a cognitive-behavioral philosophy, including daily groups and cognitive skills training programs. Both institutions also had a similar, moderate level of correctional supervision, with dorm-style sleeping (as opposed to locked cells), specifically designated time-out rooms for dangerous behavior, and a tight set of rules and regulations. Neither facility was completely locked or electronically monitored.

Some aspects of the focal institutions were also quite different. First, the program duration at Wildwood House was 4 to 6 months, compared with 9 to 12 months at Seven Acres Camp. Seven Acres camp, which was a larger facility, also offered a specialized transitional living program where the youth spent 6 weeks specifically preparing for their release. During these 6 weeks, the residents attended school and/or work during the day and then spent the night in a designated transition dorm. Wildwood House did not offer this specialized transition program. Rather, to exit this facility, youth were required to complete a series of "contracts" (i.e., written work exploring etiology of crime, cycles of violence, and family relationships) and meet individualized behavioral goals. In the few weeks prior to their planned release, staff would routinely meet with youth to ensure that they were on track to exit, and the youth were permitted to visit home on the weekends. However, due to limited space in the facility, youth

were also sometimes released prior to their completion of their individualized treatment plans.

Recruitment and Sampling

During 16 months of field observations at Wildwood House, the researchers (the author of this article and a graduate student researcher) invited incoming residents to participate in a series of three to five in-depth qualitative interviews. To recruit participants, the researchers delivered group presentations about the purpose of the study, the procedures, the time commitment, and risks and benefits of participation. Residents who expressed interest in the study were individually screened, and if they met the selection criteria, the researchers requested parental consent during visiting days. A total of 12 youth participated in these interviews and are included in this analysis.

At Seven Acres Camp, the researchers were specifically interested in studying the transition program, which housed about 20 youth at any given time. Residents were recruited for the study on their admission to the 6-week transition program. The recruitment procedure also took place in a group format. Eligibility criteria included parental consent and a commitment to participate in the study for at least 3 months following their release. In total, 10 youth participated in the study at Seven Acres Camp. Of these, 8 are included in this analysis and 2 were excluded because of the absence of information pertinent to this article.

Data Collection

Although a variety of data collection efforts took place for the larger study, this article focuses on the interviews conducted with the youth surrounding their time of preparation for exit. These exit interviews were completed within 3 weeks of the youths' planned departure from their respective facilities. A semi-structured interview guide was used to gather participants' thoughts about lessons learned in the facilities, their anticipation and fears surrounding their exits, strategies they might use to overcome obstacles, and their hopes and goals for their futures. The exit interviews lasted between 60 and 90 min and were digitally recorded. At both facilities, the researchers conducted the interviews in private, soundproof rooms to preserve confidentiality. The author, a trained social worker and professor, was present at all of the interviews and was accompanied by one of the three graduate student researchers who worked on the project at various times. The graduate students who conducted or attended these interviews were enrolled in either a master's level or a doctoral level social work program. The role of the lead interviewer was to engage in and direct the flow of the conversation, whereas the second interviewer took detailed notes.

Data Analysis

A total of 20 youth were included in this analysis, including 12 from Wildwood House and 8 from Seven Acres Camp. Demographic characteristics of these youth are located

Table 1. Sample Description

Name	Age at entry	Committing offense	Ethnicity	Facility
Motivation to change: Low				
Brad	16	Auto theft/probation violation	Native American	Wildwood House
Caleb	15	Assault and terroristic threats	African American	Seven Acres Camp
Eric	15	Theft	White	Wildwood House
Jermaine	17	Firearm possession	African American	Seven Acres Camp
Terrell	15	Probation violation/truancy	African American	Wildwood House
Motivation to change: Moderate/ambivalent				
Ace	16	Felony/probation violation	African American	Seven Acres Camp
Blue	17	Robbery	African	Seven Acres Camp
Buddy	17	Motor vehicle theft	African	Seven Acres Camp
Elijah	16	Assault/probation violation	African American	Wildwood House
Humphrey	15	Assault/probation violation	White/African American	Seven Acres Camp
Josh	16	Felony theft	White	Wildwood House
Jason	17	Felony escape	Hmong	Wildwood House
Jamal	15	Weapons possession	African American	Wildwood House
Kei	16	Probation violation/burglary	Hmong	Wildwood House
Nino	16	Probation violation	African American	Wildwood House
Motivation to change: High				
CJ	17	Felony theft	White	Seven Acres Camp
George	17	Assault	White/Native American	Seven Acres Camp
Mario	15	Sexual assault	Latino	Wildwood House
Nick	15	Criminal sexual conduct	White	Seven Acres House
Trevor	15	Burglary	White	Wildwood House

in Table 1. All are male and the age range was 15 to 17 years at the time of facility entrance. The total number of transcripts studied was 24. Each individual in the sample was associated with at least one transcript, and 4 of the youth had additional transcripts reviewed in cases where their exit interview spanned two sittings ($n = 2$) or if they exited and then quickly returned to spend more time in the facility ($n = 2$). In the latter case, these youth had some time to reflect on preparation for exit and strategies that they may have used to better manage their reentry to society, which differentiates

them from the rest of the pool. As such, these “reflection” interviews are specified when they are included in the results.

To conduct the analysis, the author first read through each of the 24 transcripts and extracted all of the segments related to the research questions. Next, the author and a graduate student researcher (who was not connected with the data collection) independently coded a subset of transcripts to note major themes, concepts, and patterns. The two coders found remarkably similar initial data patterns. From these procedures, the analysts then devised a coding rubric along the lines of six major clusters of codes and several subcodes associated with each cluster. The major coding clusters included: “motivation to change,” “practical strategies,” “cognitive strategies,” “responsibility for change,” “perceptions of supports,” and “future visions.” The analysts then returned to the transcripts and used a more focused coding procedure that was developed inductively from the initial coding exercises.

When the focused coding procedure was completed, the author used data matrices to summarize the findings. These matrices listed the individual youth in rows and noted each individual’s relationship to the major themes in columns. The intention of this data reduction exercise was to locate larger patterns and processes between and among individuals and groups (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The data matrix was first organized by facility, noting patterns of exit strategies that were potentially associated with institutional contexts. Although the youth from Seven Acres camp evidenced a more secure footing in their practical plans due to the structure of the transition program, the variations in facility structure did not differentiate the youth according to the other major clusters of codes. Rather, in the process of examining the data, the author found that motivation to change shaped youths’ cognitive strategies to prepare for exit as well as their future visions. Once this overarching data pattern was identified, the author returned to the transcripts to further examine and confirm, challenge, and refine the major findings. The results of this analysis are presented accordingly.

Results

This results section begins by defining the concept of “motivation to change” as it emerged from the data. Among the youth interviewed, vast differences were apparent in their expressed desire to achieve a noncriminal lifestyle and relatedly, in the factors they cited that could potentially “motivate” them to change. Youth who expressed little openness toward change (25%; $n = 5$) identified fear of going back to jail or “getting caught” as their primary reason to potentially discontinue involvement in crime. Yet when contemplating their lives “on the outs,” these youth also believed a return to a criminal lifestyle was either the most realistic or comfortable option for them. Caleb, for example, explained to the researchers that he maintained his commitment to “not changing” throughout his program stay, stating, “I told them [the staff] I ain’t changing at all. I’ll change when I want to change, and I don’t want to right now.” Although the other less-motivated youth were not quite this resistant to change, they were nevertheless honest about their lack of motivation to move toward a law-abiding lifestyle. As

Jermaine explained, "I'm just trying to get out. I ain't gonna say change you know, because you can't just say you are going to change, I'm just going to try and do better than what I was doing."

The largest group of youth (50%; $n = 10$) were moderately, albeit ambivalently motivated to change. These youth cited several of the same "deterrence" motivators that the low-motivation group expressed, in particular the fear of going back to a juvenile facility or even worse, ending up in adult prison. However, they also expressed a stronger desire to change for prosocial reasons, such as wanting to forge a better life for the sake of their families, including for some, their own children. Elijah from Wildwood House stated,

The point is, I can't be out of my son's life any more. Like I ain't never had a dad, a real dad, and I don't want my son to have a stepdad, so I want to be the dad I ain't never had for him. So that's what motivating me. And I don't want to be no dad that he got to look at in a casket and stuff, and going to a funeral.

Like Elijah, other ambivalent youth recognized that if they continued the life they were leading, they could wind up "in a casket." Kei described, "I'm scared of death, I know how short life is now. A day is a day, you know. You gotta stay awake you can't just waste it doing stupid stuff." Fear of death provided some of these youth with motivation to change.

Despite an expressed openness to leaving their criminal identities "at the door" on exit, this group also expressed a degree of ambivalence about their own capacity for change, and in particular, whether they would be capable of maintaining their change once they returned to old friends and influences. Kei went on to explain: "I have to see what's going to happen, you know. What might happen in the future, all that stuff. I might come back here, I might hang out with my friends again." As Kei's narrative relays, motivation to achieve a law-abiding lifestyle was often tempered by a simultaneous consideration that they may not necessarily be able to sustain these goals on their release.

The highly motivated group (25%; $n = 5$) described an array of factors motivating them to change, including their family members, a personal desire for a better life, fear of death and adult prison, and a goal to cease victimizing others. Several of these motivations clearly overlapped with those expressed by the other two groups, yet this group was uniquely motivated by a concern for crime victims. Nick, who was confined on account of a sex offense and served more than 3 years, explained, "I don't want to hurt people. I don't want to do what I did again." Nick believed that a combination of the cognitive treatment program plus his own motivation had facilitated his change process, stating,

I came in here wanting to change so that I didn't get kicked out of the program, but other than that, I really didn't. And I've learned a lot here, and I started wanting to change to be better. So I kept learning and changing.

Like Nick, other youth who expressed a high-level motivation to change desired to forge healthier lives not just for themselves but also for the sake of the larger society.

Practical Strategies for Exit

Regardless of expressed motivation to change, all of the youth were contemplating and planning the logistical components of their exit and reentry. First and foremost, they emphasized a need for legal employment and a steady and significant income. Even the least-motivated offenders described work as the most important component of transition planning. At Seven Acres Camp, an employment component was built into the conditions of their release, so all of these youth had internships and jobs mostly in place on exit. In this context of the transition cottage, these youth appeared to be more prepared with their immediate goals than those from Wildwood House, whose transition process was less structured. George, a highly motivated youth from Seven Acres camp, described how he had worked his way into a position where he could make enough money to at least partially support himself, his girlfriend, and infant son. He explained,

One of my goals was to find a job, which I did. I hope to maintain that, and get a raise, stuff like that . . . just the basic stuff in life, like a good citizen would do. That's the stuff that I want to value that I want to get. . . . What I'd say is a good citizen is a person who gets up, goes to work every day. If he's got a family, take care of his family, that's his number one priority, and then himself.

Here George's narrative suggests that the practical component of work was also a step toward becoming a "good citizen." As a young man who was highly motivated to change, an opportunity for employment was also a route to a new identity possibility.

In addition to employment, youth also often suggested that plans for schooling were salient to their exits. For some, this meant returning to a public high school; for others, it meant continuing their postsecondary education in a community college or a vocational/trade school. Typically, youth viewed school as a route to a different life, one in which they could potentially gain a degree, increase their earning potential, and secure a better life for themselves and/or their families and children. Secondary to work and school, a few youth were making practical plans for finding housing or activities to fill their time, but the majority of the preparation strategies that youth described centered on vocational and educational plans.

Cognitive Preparation and "Self-Talk"

Unlike the practical strategies, the cognitive strategies that youth used to prepare themselves for exit were quite varied. For youth with little openness to change, the main cognitive strategy they used was to deny or dismiss the difficulties or challenges that they might face on their release. For example, when asked, "Do you have any fear about getting out?" Jermaine replied, "No, not really. Just whatever happens will happen,

you know?” This “brushing off” of the potential difficulties of their release also seemed to accompany a dismissal of overall impact of their confinement on their identity. As Eric from Wildwood House bluntly stated, “This program—it really didn’t accomplish anything for me.”

By contrast, the exit narratives of youth who were ambivalent toward or highly motivated to change articulated a range of cognitive strategies to enhance their possibilities for a successful transition. These cognitive strategies very much paralleled the therapeutic tools that both facilities taught the youth in their treatment groups. For example, many youth discussed the benefits of learning how to use “thought stopping,” meaning the ability to react without impulsivity to triggers such as drugs and alcohol or old friends. Nino from Wildwood House contemplated how he would activate this strategy when tempted by his major trigger, marijuana:

Like if I’m in a car, riding with friends, and they just start smoking [marijuana], I can’t get out of the car. But I now more than likely, I’m fixing to roll down my window, for the simple fact I don’t want that in my lungs or my body . . . So I feel it’ll be real ignorant of me to start smoking again, period let alone, be around it. But now I can be around it and hold my thoughts together and not smoke it.

Here Nino identifies a potential scenario that will likely challenge his resolve to stay away from drugs but feels confident that he can find a way around the trigger, such as rolling down the window or “holding my thoughts together” and not smoking. Although this idea may appear to be somewhat simplistic, this strategy directly reflects the cognitive refusal and thought stopping skills that the youth had rehearsed in the course of their treatment programs.

Youth who were moderately or very open to change also prepared themselves for exit with a set of narratives geared to bolster their self-confidence. These “confidence building” strategies took such forms as thinking positively, staying true to oneself, and locating internal strengths. For example, Blue from Seven Acres camp recognized in one part of the interview that “it’s gonna be hard, you know . . . it’s just gonna be hard, dealing with the temptations,” and a few moments later, he stated, “I just have to take care of myself, I have to put myself first.” Although some of the moderately motivated youth also tended at times to dismiss the potential challenges that lay ahead, more commonly, they were engaged in a process of anticipating reentry challenges and trying to bolster their confidence to contend with them.

Related to this self-confidence was the notion that remaining “true to oneself” would help them to build a more desirable future. In a telling moment during Nino’s exit interview, he explained how his true self would help guide him in the right direction:

So basically it’ll be like a whole another person, but I learned that I ain’t gotta put no show on for nobody. I ain’t gotta put no show on for myself, because deep down inside I know who I am and what I’m capable of. So I ain’t really gotta prove a point to nobody, unless I feel that I need to. And even if I feel that I need to, I still really don’t have to.

This search for and reliance on an authentic self has some resemblance to the type of synthesizing identity work that Ebaugh (1988) described as part of any major role transition. For the youth who were moderately or very open to change, this “authentic self” was articulated as an internal tool to stay true to their goals even in the face of major crime temptations. As Nino articulated, you have to do it “for yourself” rather than trying to prove “a point” to anyone else.

Individual Responsibility

Regardless of motivation to change, youth were united in their belief that change is a strictly individual matter. As such, with regards to future criminal involvement, it was up to them and no one else to take responsibility for their future actions and the potential consequences of these actions. Youth unanimously expressed that irrespective of what one learns in treatment, the essential foundation for change comes from within. As Humphrey stated, “The staff are real supportive here . . . they want to help you change, but you gotta want to change yourself first.”

This individual responsibility ethos occurred in the narratives both when youth felt they were doing well and were proud of their accomplishments as well as when they had made mistakes in their exit plans or release. Ace’s first exit interview, for example, raised this theme:

Ace: Change, it’s all up to the person.

Interviewer: No one helped you get there but you.

Ace: No. And nobody hasn’t. I mean, people can talk to you, but it’s up to you . . .

But, I just did it myself. Turn everything around.

Interviewer: Good!

Ace: I’m saying that’s what it is on the outs, too. If you gonna do it, you gotta do it.

Upon his release from the Seven Acres Camp transition program, Ace very quickly returned to the same facility after violating the terms of his probation with a drug possession arrest. Although he had experienced homelessness and unemployment on release, he blamed only himself for his failures, remaining steadfast in his opinion that his criminal relapse was “all on me.” On reflection on his experience (during the second interview), he felt that he had left the facility without adequately preparing himself for these challenges, as he explained, akin: “packing a suitcase, but not folding your clothes.”

Contending With Friends and Family

Related to the theme of self-reliance, youth by and large did not anticipate receiving a great deal of support from friends and family members. Rather, they commonly articulated a sense that close friends and family members presented barriers to their potential for change. Brad, for example, identified his friends as the biggest challenge to abiding by his probation orders:

If I like start hanging out with my friends again, and just like start smoking again, drinking, relapsing, stuff like that. That'd be the biggest problem, just like hanging out with my friends . . . that's what I'm worried about.

Although the less motivated were fairly certain that their former friends would pose crime temptations, they tended to use the “dismissal” strategy described earlier to contend with these hypothetical challenges. Terrell explained,

Yes, I hang with my gang friends on my weekends . . . I still hang with them, but when they go and do their trouble or do their dirt, I'll just, know what I'm saying, I'll just go my own direction.

Here, Terrell posits that he does not want to leave his primary friendship network but that he can “choose” to avoid the activities (i.e., “the dirt”) that might get him into trouble. He does not anticipate any personal challenges associated with this delicate balancing act.

Youth who were more moderately motivated to change were thinking in a bit more detail and complexity about how they would truly avoid getting into trouble. Mario described his own thought process about facing challenges:

I was just thinking, this is gonna be hard, do I really want to not see my friends? Not hang around with the gang? . . . But now that I been at home more [on weekend visits] I realize that it ain't gonna be that hard—like real, real hard, like I thought before, you know. So it's gonna take some time and it's gonna take my effort not to hang around with them.

In this excerpt, one can see that Mario is struggling with key questions, does he really want to abandon his friendship group? Is it worse to feel isolated or to risk getting into potential trouble with the law? What is consistent here among these narratives is the near universal notion that old friends and supports will have to be abandoned, lending further weight to the very pervasive theme of individual responsibility. Mario continued, “It's all up to me . . . It's just my choice—whether I want to be with the gang or with the positive friends.” As Mario framed the situation, there are just choices: to make new friends or to go back to those who support you, but it may lead you in the wrong direction. The belief that you cannot have your old friends back reinforced the idea that the challenges of exit and reentry must be tackled alone.

A few youth in the highly motivated group articulated slightly more developed strategies to reach out to positive social supports who could help them to achieve their goals. George described how he planned to use his positive relationship with his parents to help him cope with drug temptations:

I get temptations. I'm not gonna say I don't. But that's where my support comes in. I got people that I can talk to and people that I can call. And parents are always

there. I can get my dad up in the middle of the night if I felt I needed to sit up and talk. I'd be stuck without them. My parents are, they're there.

Similarly, Trevor expressed that although challenges will arise, he will seek to stay part of a community that can support him, and where he may be able to support others. He said, "To stay clean [from crime], you know, I'll keep on coming to groups. I might even just try helping other people, you know, with their problems, too. So I can learn more and more."

Thus, although the "go it alone" narrative was an overarching theme among these exit narratives, youth had some varied ideas about how they planned to involve others, particularly their friends and family members, in their lives on reentry. Although many anticipated that their resolve to stay away from crime would be challenged by the presence of criminally involved friends and family members, youth who were very open to change had also thought about ways to seek out people in their lives who could help them to stay on track with their goals. Even the overriding individual responsibility ethos encountered some limitations related to the need and desire for positive social support.

Future Vision: Who Will I Become?

Not surprisingly, motivation to change also had a strong influence on how the youth articulated their future visions. For those who were less open to change, their future goals were quite undefined. For example, when asked "when you think about your life, your future, what do you see?" Jermaine replied, "Nothing, I don't need nothing really, I don't know." Brad similarly described a vague notion of his future: "I don't know yet. I mean, I'm about to start thinking about it, because I don't really know."

Although these responses represented the more extreme views of not really even "seeing" or contemplating a future, other youth expressed more mixed views of their future. On one hand, they looked forward to their freedom, and on the other hand, they doubted their ability to have any different type of lifestyle in the long run. Anticipating potential trouble back at home, Kei engaged in the following dialogue:

Interviewer: What do you think are the chances that you will come back here?

Kei: Like 75%.

Interviewer: 75% you think you'll come back?

Kei: No, not back here, but meet my friends, yeah. Back here would be like . . . it could be 35% . . . I might come back if I screw up, but I don't want to come back, though.

As Kei's example illustrates, these young men expressed a tendency to "weigh" options and future possibilities with some degree of uncertainty about achieving their goals to remain free from incarceration. Here, we see an underpinning of uncertainty about the ability to create and sustain a different future, even given the various practical and internal strategies they had developed. Moreover, because change is really "up to

the individual” according to their narratives, this ambivalence about the future really is connected with a professed lack of confidence to surmount the various pressures of their old surroundings. Even Trevor, who was highly motivated about his full recovery from criminal activity expressed the following fears about leaving Wildwood House:

Interviewer: What’s the fear—what do you see as some of the challenges of leaving?

Trevor: Dealing with the stuff I started out with. Going out to the crazy life.

Interviewer: Ok.

Trevor: Like you said, there’s—you know, support and structure here and all that—and it’s not out there. I have to go back to that. And I just have to apply the things that I’ve learned here.

[Note: Some lines of the interview exchanges are removed as the respondent moves on to talk about his relationship in particular with his father.]

Interviewer: So on a scale of 1 to 10, how confident are you that you won’t commit any more crimes in your life?

Trevor: 9 and 3-fourths.

Interviewer: So you’re reserving a little bit of doubt?

Trevor: Yes. There has to be some doubt in there, you can’t be perfect.

Here, Trevor feels mostly confident that he can achieve his goals, yet still leaves open a small degree of doubt. Other highly motivated youth also engaged in crafting a future vision that included the possibility of a law-abiding sense of self. As George stated,

Now, my attitude’s more positive, like I have a future. I believe in myself. I believe in that I could be a good father and raise my son to the best of my ability . . . I value life in general. Before, I could care less if I lived or died. It didn’t matter. I mean, all I pray for is that I just keep my job and keep on, keep on the right track and have positive people around me that will support me when times do get tough.

Like George, youth who were very open to change looked forward to a time when they could safely say that they had created a different future for themselves, a goal that rested mostly on them, but one that they would consider to be an enormous accomplishment.

Discussion

This article explored youths’ narratives of exit from correctional confinement. At the juncture of preparing to leave an institutional setting, all of the youth were contemplating their pending return to society in practical ways and drew on a range of cognitive

strategies to contend with anticipated personal and social challenges. Youth were also actively considering their futures—both who they wanted to become and how they might arrive at these goals. Looking closely at these narratives, it appears that the juncture of exit is an important time period from which to understand some of the nuances and complexities of role exit, identity shifts, and the movement toward desistance.

Consistent with desistance theory suggesting the importance of individual motivation and agency (Giordano et al., 2002; Maruna, 2001), openness to change appeared to have a strong influence on the youth's articulated exit strategies. Although all of the youth emphasized practical preparation and articulated a "go it alone" ethos, the cognitive strategies they used to think about achieving their goals were quite varied. To summarize, youth who were less open to change held limited hopes for an alternative sense of self, largely dismissed the challenges that lay ahead and as such did not possess many well-defined strategies to achieve different future possibilities. Youth who had a medium or ambivalent level of motivation to change articulated change strategies as well as doubts but were particularly skeptical that they would be able to circumvent the negative influences of their old friends and family members. What differentiated the highly motivated youth from those in the other two categories was a stronger sense of confidence in their ability to change, a more realistic anticipation of how to contend with old influences by reaching out to positive supports, and a sense of wanting to protect others from future victimization. This latter finding around victimization resonates with Maruna's (2001) notion that desistance involves a desire to give back to the society.

Theoretically, this article extends prior work by examining closely how identity transitions may be established in a juvenile correctional setting. Ebaugh's (1988) exit theory proposed that a process of internal disengagement from a prior identity must precede the integration or synthesis of future identity. Yet, this theory is predicated on the idea of more voluntary identity transitions among adults, where a catalyst for change (either welcome or not) underlies the experience of role abandonment and identity transition. In the case of incarcerated youth, change is often forced and as even the most motivated offenders articulated, few youth enter involuntary correctional confinement wanting to achieve personal change. Even this motivation must be learned. Thus, at the juncture of exit, most of the youth were considering possibilities for change in small and potentially incremental ways (e.g., not smoking marijuana when offered or trying to stay away from certain friends), yet were often overwhelmed by the challenges they anticipated. The forced nature of involuntary confinement may then set apart this process from other, more voluntary role transitions in which disengagement with the prior self may be a necessary and welcome, albeit difficult, first step toward identity transformation. Struggle with disavowing a former self seems more intrinsic in a correction setting when an identity transition is involuntary and even "required" as a condition of release (Abrams et al., 2005).

One of the major contributions of Giordano et al.'s (2002) theory of cognitive transformation was recognition of the importance of openness to change as a potential foundation for a process of criminal desistance that may follow. The findings presented in

this article support this theory in the sense that those who were more motivated to change articulated more well-defined alternative selves and more carefully laid out strategies to contend with anticipated challenges. These findings also add important information about the nuances of desistance at this particular moment, evidenced by the intensive cognitive preparation and conflict involved in these exit narratives. For example, even the most motivated offenders felt themselves to be at a crossroads: ready to face reentry challenges but reserving the remote possibility of failure. Isolating this juncture in time, it appears that exits can be characterized by a combination of openness to change as well as fears and doubts that lend themselves to youth offenders feeling isolated and alone and fully responsible for their futures. On one hand, this individual responsibility can be seen as agency, yet on the other hand, as young people who are returning to familiar and influential social settings, this individualistic ethos may lend itself to feelings of failure and doubt if they perceive that their group environment does not support their desire to change. Additional research is needed to investigate these nuances of change in identity and cognitions at various points of the incarceration and release process.

These findings also lead to implications for practitioners, such as corrections officers, social workers, and therapists who are working with juvenile offenders in out-of-home care facilities or in reentry services. Although prior work on young offender reentry has pointed to the social and interpersonal difficulties associated with reentry (Abrams, 2007; Sullivan, 2004) or the more practical matters of transition programming (Altschuler & Armstrong, 2002), very little research has focused on emotional and cognitive preparation for exit. To begin, it is clear that although the practical components of exit are important for all youth, focusing on these solutions alone cannot address the magnitude of the personal and social challenge involved in community reentry. Practitioners may wish to start with practical concerns as a launching point for youth preparing to leave corrections but then must also closely assess on an individual basis such issues as motivation to change and strategies to contend with reentry challenges. These findings also suggest that level of expressed openness to change can also guide the treatment strategy in preparation for exit. For example, youth with low motivation may need to start with very small and incremental goals toward change, whereas those with higher levels of expressed motivation may require more practice in contending with the challenges that they anticipate or fear. A one-size-fits-all mentality will not work for transition planning, given the wide range of motivations and strategies expressed even among the 20 individuals considered in this study.

Moreover, correctional workers should be cognizant of the individual ethos that is guiding these youths' exit and reentry strategies. Youth should be encouraged to take responsibility for their actions but not at the expense of reaching out for social support. Research shows that young people fare better on reentry when they use prosocial support systems (Bullis & Yovanoff, 2002; Todis et al., 2001). However, the youth in this article tended to largely doubt the utility of these types of supports, preferring to believe that success is wholly a manner of individual will. Individual will is certainly one part of the equation but having the support of one's social network is also

important to integrate the change in oneself into the larger social world (Ebaugh, 1988). Practitioners can help exiting youth to develop and expand their prosocial support networks so that they do not feel that they have to face all of these difficult reentry challenges on their own.

Limitations and Conclusion

This study has several limitations. First, the use of two facilities as recruitment sites with a small sample introduces some inherent biases related to the different treatment the youth received and in particular, their level of preparation for exit. The author looked closely at these differences in the analysis, yet facility context was not as salient as was originally presumed. Nevertheless, it remains a source of influence on these exit narratives. Another limitation is that the data included in this analysis were mostly collected at one point in time. As such, this article does not provide information on how the exit process might shape a longer term process of cognitive change or influence patterns of reoffending. The author has considered longitudinal questions in other publications from these data (Abrams, 2007; Abrams & Hyun, 2009), but this article primarily relied on cross-sectional information.

In sum, from the youths' perspective, key ingredients to successful exit appear to encompass motivation or openness to change, practical preparation for a reentry, cognitive tools to cope with anticipated challenges, and sound judgment about potentially useful positive social supports. Prerelease preparation should focus on all of these elements yet need to be personalized to individual motivation and circumstances. As mentioned, this article did not associate these "ingredients" with any particular set of outcomes. However, based on theoretical considerations and prior desistance research (La Bel et al., 2008; Maruna, 2001), youths' ability to forge a future vision of self that does not involve criminal activity and at the same time to believe that they can be "true to themselves" and hopeful about their futures may provide a sound foundation for their lives on the outs. Additional research is needed to investigate how these exit strategies might predict the youth's actual reentry outcomes.

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Notes

1. The third facility housed offenders with mental illnesses for much longer periods of time, and a decision was made to exclude this facility from the analysis.
2. All names of facilities and the individuals quoted in this article are falsified for confidentiality.

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