

**PREPARING AT-RISK AND GANG-INVOLVED
YOUTH FOR THE WORKFORCE:
*AN ANALYSIS OF PROMISING PROGRAMMATIC
STRATEGIES FROM LOCAL AND NATIONAL
YOUTH EMPLOYMENT PROGRAMS***

A Resource Guide for the
Shannon Community Safety Initiative

November 2010



Authors:

Chad Posick
Russell Wolff
Jack McDevitt
Northeastern University

Marc Germain
James Stark
Executive Office of Public Safety and Security
Office of Grants and Research

Acknowledgements

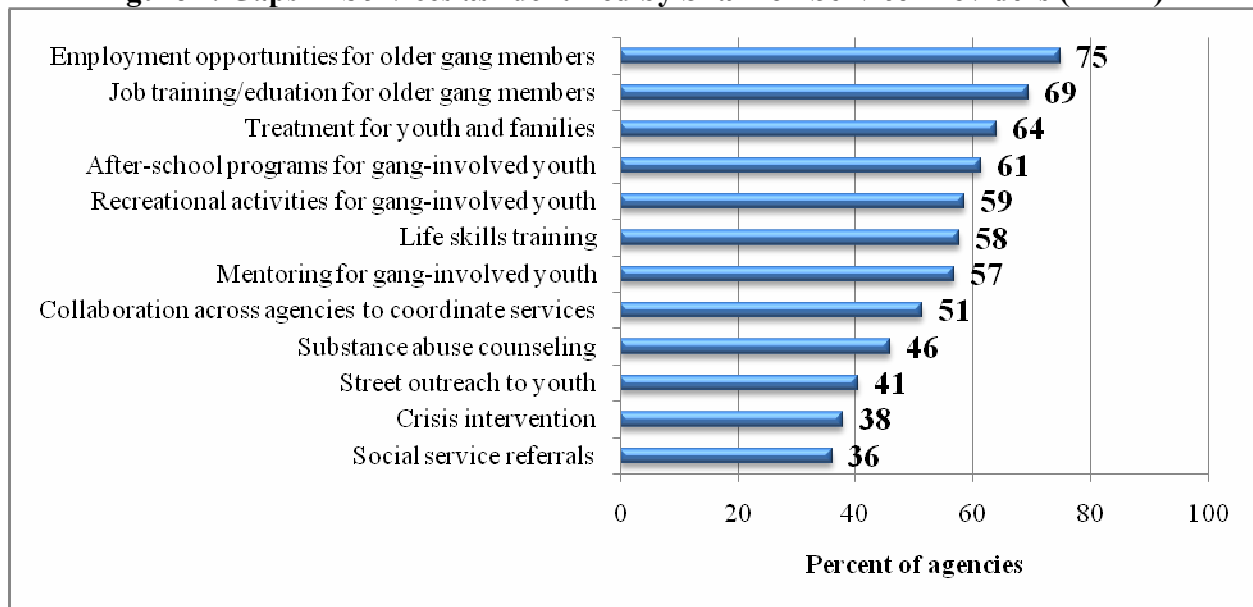
We would like to thank the Executive Office of Public Safety and Security, including Undersecretary for Law Enforcement and Fire Services, Kurt Schwartz; Senior Counsel for Law Enforcement and Fire Services, Karen Wells; and Executive Director of the Office of Grants and Research, Ellen Frank; for their thoughtful feedback and guidance on development of this resource guide. Lisa Laguerre, Assistant Director of the Institute on Race and Justice (IRJ) at Northeastern University and Julie French, Faculty Secretary, at Northeastern's School of Criminology and Criminal Justice provided invaluable assistance on the guide. The research team would also like to thank the programs that shared with us their time and insight: CareerPoint Holyoke, YouthBuild of Lawrence, Worcester Youth Center, Roca Transitional Employment Program, and New Directions of New Bedford.

This project was supported by Byrne JAG 2006-DJ-BX-0185 and 2008-DJ-BX-0715 funds, awarded by the Bureau of Justice Assistance, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice, through the Executive Office of Public Safety and Security, Office of Grants & Research (OGR). Points of view in this document are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.

INTRODUCTION

Youth employment rates in the United States are at their lowest levels since World War II. In the past decade, national rates have declined from 45.2% in 2000 to just 26.2% in late 2009 (Sum et al., 2010). This decrease is part of a larger systemic economic crisis impacting all industry sectors, particularly entry-level labor positions. Organizations providing prevention and intervention services for at-risk and gang-involved youth receiving support through the Shannon Community Safety Initiative (Shannon CSI)¹ grant identified employment opportunities and job training/education for gang members as the two largest gaps in services. For at-risk and gang-involved youth, finding and sustaining stable employment is a daunting task with numerous obstacles.

Figure 1. Gaps in Services as Identified by Shannon Service Providers (n=111)



Comprehensive youth employment programs provide support structures that can address this gap in services by assisting youth in attaining the training and skills necessary to compete in today's highly competitive workforce. These programs, generally, provide a minimum level of

¹ The Senator Charles E. Shannon, Jr. Community Safety Initiative (CSI) is multi-year grant initiative that funds 17 sites encompassing 41 communities in Massachusetts with identified youth gang violence problems. To learn more about the Shannon CSI, visit www.mass.gov/safety/shannon.

formal education, job training, and wrap-around services that aim to increase employment opportunities for at-risk and gang-involved youth. Comprehensive Gang Model author Irving Spergel describes two critical points in which to intervene with a youth gang member:

1. During the early teen years, just prior to the time when the youth develops a serious commitment to gang life; and
2. During the late adolescent period, when the youth no longer sees the benefits of hanging out with the gang and recognizes the related risks of long-term imprisonment, injury, and death. (Spergel et al., 1994).

While it may be advantageous to intervene in the life of a young person during one of these two periods, we believe there are also opportunities to engage youth that have not shown significant interest in gaining legitimate employment.

By analyzing promising programmatic strategies in youth employment programs nationally and distilling lessons learned from several Shannon CSI youth employment programs, this resource guide will:

- Identify key functions of youth employment programs;
- Identify issues and challenges involved in providing workforce development training and employment services to young people over multiple risk profiles;
- Highlight promising programmatic strategies that researchers and practitioners have found to be effective in youth employment programs; and
- Provide examples of nationally recognized and locally implemented programs utilizing a range of promising program strategies.

To determine what these promising program strategies are for each category of youth we (1) reviewed recent literature on training and employing at-risk and gang-involved youth, and (2) interviewed Shannon CSI service providers who work with youth over multiple risk profiles in employment training and job placement programs.²

² For additional information on programming and strategies for training and employing young people, please see the resources listed in the appendix.

FUNCTIONS OF YOUTH EMPLOYMENT PROGRAMS

In researching youth employment programs and speaking with several Shannon CSI programs, we found two major functions common to the range of programs:

Function 1: Assess youth skills. Individuals entering youth employment programs vary in past educational attainment, health and substance abuse issues, previous job skills, familial issues, peer pressures, past criminal activity, and involvement with the justice system. An assessment of youth skills allows the youth employment program to determine the level of assistance a youth may need and the challenges providing obstacles to the youth. The assessment process, often in the form of an application or intake form, will typically take place upon youth intake into the program. For some youth, an assessment may take place over a longer period of time to ensure the youth feels comfortable in the program and to ensure the youth is ready for such a program.

The assessment will generally request youth answer a number of questions such as details regarding demographic information, educational and employment history, potential employment barriers, and well as information to identify what the youth hopes to achieve in the program. In addition to the application/intake form, many Shannon CSI youth employment programs also have young people complete a TABE (Test of Adult Basic Education) exam which will provide the agency baseline information on prior educational attainment.

Information provided by the youth to the case manager or outreach worker will assist the agency understand if the youth will benefit from programs under their umbrella, or if the youth should be referred to another service provider to receive more appropriate support services. Many youth employment programs often follow up with a one-on-one meeting with the youth to “get a bigger picture of what is happening in the young person’s life” as one program partner indicated. Shannon CSI partners indicated that among the critical things they want learn is

whether the youth have available transportation options, consistent housing, and more generally, if the youth is prepared for employment.

Function 2: Prepare youth for employment. Youth employment programs offer a range of services to prepare youth for employment. Typical programs include:

- Educational development options such as GED or pre-GED classes, English as a Second Language, and MCAS support;
- Holistic support, including referrals, to address substance and mental health challenges, lack of housing, access to reliable transportation, outstanding legal issues, and family care;
- Job readiness training, including resume preparation, interviewing skills, and computer training; and
- Vocational development in fields such as carpentry/construction, weatherization, green jobs, and culinary arts.

As one Shannon CSI program partner reported, among numerous obstacles they face is working with “participants that come from broken homes and have a false sense of hope, and lack realistic goals and positive role models.” A common theme we identified in research conducted for this report and in our interviews with service providers is preparing a youth for employment is a time-consuming task and is best attained through building a strong relationship and “helping them [young people] to identify, plan for, and achieve their goals.”

In the following sections, we will outline how these two common functions of youth employment programs work with other elements to serve youth at varied starting places in the employment process.

EMPLOYMENT PROGRAMS FOR AT-RISK YOUTH

This section will discuss challenges and best practices in training and providing employment services to youth before they become seriously involved in delinquent or gang activity. These youth, defined in this guide as “at-risk,” are interested in or attempting to seek employment. They are young people who have exhibited behaviors that have been found to be associated with delinquency later in life. Such behaviors include displaying short tempers, disrupting the classroom at school, and behaving aggressively (e.g., fighting or bullying others). While at-risk youth may have not been formally involved in the justice system, they may have been brought to the attention of service providers through an outreach worker, a school official, or other governmental agency referral, because of their poor behavior and associations with other youth. They may belong to an out-of-school program such as a Boys & Girls Club or YMCA. They may also gain this designation because of familial reasons such as having a parent incarcerated, a sibling involved in gang violence, or a host of other reasons.

CHALLENGES

At-risk youth can experience challenges in navigating training and employment opportunities because they are likely to have deeply ingrained behavioral patterns that are resistant to change (Patterson et al., 1992). These youth are generally faced with multiple risk factors that increase their chances of dropping out or being removed from school through incarceration, pregnancy, illness, or injury. While labor market participation is shrinking for nearly all segments of society (Sum et al., 2010), this decline is most severe for high school dropouts and minority dropouts in particular (Sum et al., 2009). Some of the most significant challenges for this group are described below:

- **Problems at school.** This includes dropping out, low educational achievement, low commitment and bonding to school, and problem behavior at school such as fighting and truancy.

- **Pregnancy and children.** Youth of working age that are pregnant, or already have children may find it difficult to attend programs when childcare is inadequate or expensive.
- **Abusive households.** Many youth live with parents and other family members who are abusive, which has been linked to increased delinquency in childhood and through to adulthood by weakening bonds between family members (Sampson and Laub, 1993).
- **Lack of male mentors.** Youth living in neighborhoods marked by violence and few resources often lack male role models in the family and in the community. Recent research highlights that this lack of mentorship is a risk factor for youth in those neighborhoods, while the presence of positive male role models has been found to be a protective factor in similar neighborhoods (Parker and Reckdenwald, 2008).
- **Lack of transportation.** Programs may offer great services but youth may have limited or no means to attend the program without reliable or safe transportation options.
- **Lack of previous work experience.** Shannon CSI partners have indicated that the current economic situation has created significant challenges for this cohort as they are “young people with limited experience...competing against adults with more experience and education.”

PROMISING PROGRAMMATIC STRATEGIES

The most effective programs throughout the nation provide a multi-faceted approach to building skills and training individuals for employment. Successful programs that employ or seek employment for at-risk youth provide them with not only a job, but also supervision, support, and reinforcement (OJJDP, 2000). When developing programs for at-risk youth to prepare them for employment, effective programs will typically address the strategies below:

- **Involve the family in programming.** Since most of youths’ time is spent with and learning from the family, parenting classes and family counseling are two program features that can be included in this component (OJJDP, 2000).
- **Involve an adult advocate or mentor.** For at-risk youth without supportive parents or family, a trustworthy and committed adult serving as an advocate or mentor may provide a positive role model as well as a resource to navigate the many challenges of childhood and adolescence (OJJDP, 2000).
- **Provide after-school support.** Many youth need assistance with homework as well as social skills. After-school support provides a mechanism to help youth with schoolwork as well as to provide supervision, which is critical during after-school hours when youth victimization is highest (OJJDP, 2000).
- **Create partnerships.** Youth often have co-occurring issues such as mental health disorders, substance dependency, histories of family abuse, and may also be pregnant or have children of their own. Collaborations with community organizations and health

advocates are critical to meet the multiple needs of at-risk youth that often cannot be addressed solely by a youth employment agencies (OJJDP, 2000).

- **Utilize a job placement specialist.** A job placement specialist regularly attending local community and business events to identify potential placement opportunities for young people has been shown to be effective in some Shannon CSI programs. By understanding potential concerns employers have, youth employment programs can better tailor their programs' services. This person should also meet with youth to help guide their job search. By connecting job-ready youth with employers and being honest about the young people's level of training, background, and personality, as well as what the youth will bring to the job, more entry-level opportunities may become available for at-risk youth.
- **Offer alternative transportation services.** For youth without a driver's license, some Shannon CSI agencies offer driver's education courses or refer youth to appropriate services. For youth without access a vehicle, agencies often seek grant money or support from the city or business community to provide free or reduced fee public transportation passes.
- **Stipend wages for youth.** Several Shannon CSI agencies have used stipend wages to increase employer willingness to hire at-risk youth as it reduces risk and provides a financial incentive for the employer.³

Below is an example of a program recognized as a promising approach (Brown, 2002) that provides a sense of how to approach training and employing at-risk youth and a Shannon CSI program that incorporates several of the above strategies.

SafeFutures

This national program has six sites across the United States which all work with youth to increase their ability to gain employment. One program, in Contra Costa County, California, has achieved success with its participants by preparing them for the workforce and keeping them from engaging in delinquent activities. This program uses a five step approach including: (1) family-school-community partnerships, (2) gang prevention, intervention, and suppression, (3)

³ When looking at work and jobs for youth, programs should be mindful that Massachusetts and federal child labor laws apply to youth under age 18 and Massachusetts wage and hour laws apply to all Massachusetts workers. Programs should be assured that work hours, job duties, payment of wages, and other work-related conditions are consistent with these laws. If ever there is a clash of provisions, Massachusetts entities should adhere to whichever law is more restrictive. For information on U.S. Child Labor laws, www.dol.gov/dol/topic/youthlabor/index.htm; for Massachusetts child labor laws, www.malegislature.gov/Laws/GeneralLaws/PartI/TitleXXI/Chapter149. Another helpful resource can be found at www.mass.gov/ago/youthemployment.

mental health services, (4) mentoring for female clients, and (5) infrastructure strengthening (employment training). Furthermore, to ensure participants' commitment to "staying the course" to better employment, the programs conduct follow-up after youth are placed by monitoring worksites, discussing participants' performance with supervisors, and emphasizing continuing education. The program has yielded impressive results and about half of their clients transfer to better paying jobs while in the programs, as well as from subsidized to unsubsidized employment (Brown et al., 2002).

SHANNON HIGHLIGHT: CAREERPOINT HOLYOKE

"We thrive on collaborations." -Director of Programs and Services, CareerPoint Holyoke

CareerPoint of Holyoke works with youth ages 14-24, most of whom are Latino. Many of these youth encounter challenges such as poverty, homelessness, and lack of transportation. Others encounter a more diverse set of challenges such as unhealthy relationships with their family and partners. CareerPoint offers programs and services to help young people develop skills for the workplace and find jobs such as career counseling, resume building, assistance with job searches, computer workshops, and job development services.

As an organization, CareerPoint recognizes it cannot fulfill all the needs of the young people it serves. The director of programs and services stated, "While we can do our job and prepare young people for employment and education, we cannot control what happens outside our center." Therefore, through collaborations with other service providers and community organizations, CareerPoint offers referrals to GED programs, homeless services, disability services, and drop-out intervention. Through these existing relationships, CareerPoint is able to offer youth a comprehensive set of services to address their many diverse needs.

CareerPoint staff also work very closely with local employers, leveraging these relationships to provide workforce opportunities for their clients. During conversations with employers, CareerPoint staff discuss the young person's qualifications and how they would fit in as an employee with the company. "We make sure that we only send those youth who are ready for the interview and for the responsibilities of the given job," said the director of programs and services. CareerPoint reports that because of this practice, they do not receive many complaints from employers where they refer clients.

EMPLOYMENT PROGRAMS FOR DELINQUENT AND SYSTEM-INVOLVED YOUTH

Individuals in this category have a more extensive history of delinquency compared to the first group of youth discussed. These youth have either self-reported or been known by others to have committed delinquent acts, or have committed a delinquent act which elicited a response from the justice system.

While many of these young people are seeking to turn their lives around, a number of them lack the skills necessary to successfully enter the workforce. Youth involved with the justice system add at least one substantial additional risk factor in the path of youth seeking employment: a juvenile or criminal record. This section reviews the challenges and promising programs involving this category of youth.

CHALLENGES

Similar to at-risk youth, delinquent and system-involved youth present many challenges that must be addressed by youth employment programs. Often these youth have experienced the ups and downs of living a gang lifestyle and worked their first “jobs” within gangs. Spergel writes “much gang activity, including an increasing proportion of gang activity, may serve as a form of self-employment that fills part of the vacuum created by depressed levels of unemployment and underemployment...”(1994:19-20). These youth need to acquire the ability to be productive by developing academic, technical, and social skills, and by learning how to search the labor market (i.e., effectively locate and apply for appropriate jobs).

Many youth in this category have court-mandated requirements that must be met such as drug testing, curfews, and community service that, when not met, can potentially subject individuals to further incarceration. Programs should help assist their clients to meet these obligations. In order to develop and sustain a productive program that focuses on system-

involved youth, it is critical to ensure that service providers are working collaboratively with the justice system to develop programs that meet the needs and circumstances of delinquent youth (OJJDP, 2000). A Shannon CSI program notes that “there needs to be a more organized system of services...the Shannon CSI grant collaboration...is a very positive and successful example of this [collaborative] kind of approach.” Various Shannon CSI programs have found that close collaboration with the police can increase information sharing both to the service provider about court-mandated requirements, as well as to the police to know youth are taking positive steps to correct their behavior.

Nationally, possessing a criminal a record has presented barriers to employment for young adults in countless communities (Rodriguez and Petersilia, 2006). Juveniles that are adjudicated delinquent (ages under 17) are found to be guilty of committing a delinquent act. The court can commit a guilty juvenile or place the juvenile on probation. Juvenile records are generally sealed once they become adults and are not viewable by employers. In Massachusetts, when applying for a job, an individual “may answer ‘no record’ with respect to any inquiry relative to prior arrests, court appearance and adjudications in all cases of delinquency or as a child in need of services which did not result in a complaint transferred to the superior court for criminal prosecution” (M.G.L Chapter 276, Section 100a). However, adults aged 17 and over appearing in court in Massachusetts receive a criminal record, commonly known as a CORI (Criminal Offender Record Information). Documentation is kept on every state court appearance and adults will have a record in the system whether or not they were found guilty or if the case is dismissed.⁴ Employers can access a job applicant’s record after receiving permission from the state. Employers are able to view convictions and open cases while a smaller number of

⁴ On August 6, 2010, Massachusetts enacted legislation that reduces the time period for sealing criminal records. Felony record charges can now be sealed after 10 years and misdemeanor charges can be sealed after 5 years.

employers who work with vulnerable populations are able to see past charges for which there are no convictions (MassLegalHelp, 2010).

Recent changes to CORI laws in Massachusetts will impact individuals and employers when specific parts of the law take effect. As of November 4, 2010, employers will no longer be able to ask if an individual has been convicted of a crime on their initial job screening application. After February 6, 2012, an employer must present a candidate for employment with their criminal record if they wish to ask them questions about their criminal history or have made the decision to eliminate the candidate for consideration because of their criminal history (for more information on the changes, see Addendum 1).

Some of the common challenges service providers we interviewed listed in working with this population of youth include:

- **Misconceptions about employability.** Some youth incorrectly believe that they cannot obtain employment once they have been arrested.
- **Stigma of being a delinquent.** Youth with prior arrests often report a lack of motivation or feeling of hopelessness in finding/obtaining employment (Winnick and Bodkin, 2008).
- **“Revolving door” situation.** Youth in this category may be stuck in a cycle of promise and failure. These youth want to change and often make strides in “going straight.” However, because they live in families and neighborhoods that often influence their behavior and life choices towards that of violence or gangs, these youth are conflicted between doing well in conventional society and the street life.
- **Mental and psychological health problems.** Given the life that these young people lead, many have developed mental health problems such as drug dependency, post-traumatic stress disorder, and depression.
- **Peer pressure.** Delinquent and system-involved youth may maintain close ties with gang members and former associates. These individuals often provide guidance and support to try and lure them back into gang culture.

PROMISING PROGRAMMATIC STRATEGIES

A successful approach for this group must include strategies additional to those of at-risk youth not involved in the justice system. Specifically, these youth must know their rights as ex-offenders, especially as it relates to CORI, and understand the importance of finishing their high

school degree or obtaining a GED. Moreover, they must have support to escape the allure of the street and replace behavioral patterns that reflect street codes for those of conventional society.

When developing workforce training and employment programs for system-involved youth, agencies might consider including the strategies below:

- **Focus on work-based learning and academic development.** Using an entrepreneurship or service learning model has been shown to be effective in developing “real world” skills for youth both while incarcerated and in the community (Brown et al., 2002; Frey, 1999).
- **Focus on residential programming.** Adjudicated delinquents are often committed to residential facilities. These programs must address behavioral, educational, and social profiles of confined youth. Starting appropriate transition and job preparedness training before release from the facility is linked to overall success (OJJDP, 2000).
- **Enhance system collaboration.** Effective programming for youth involved in the juvenile justice system will include coordination with: (1) the juvenile justice system, (2) workforce development system, (3) educational system, (4) social services, (5) community-based organizations, and (6) the labor market (Frey, 1999; OJJDP, 2000).
- **Focus on psychological development and ties to conventional society.** Youth involved in the juvenile justice or criminal justice system are often embedded in neighborhoods that promote a “street mentality.” These youth often exhibit antisocial attitudes and look upon violence as favorable in certain situations. Such issues must be addressed before youth will be considered employable (Brown et al., 2002; OJJDP, 2000).
- **Provide long-term follow-up services.** A common mistake of programs is the neglect of the youth after employment is secured or the program is completed. A long-term case management approach is necessary to evaluate the progress of the individual and to continually monitor behavior (Frey, 1999; OJJDP, 2000).

Below is another example of a promising approach offered by Brown (2002) on how programs can work with youth that have been involved in the justice system as well as a few local examples from Shannon CSI programs:

Omega Boys Club

Based in San Francisco, California, this program provides training for youth who have been involved with the juvenile justice system. While the program offers skills training to ready youth for employment, its primary focus is on preparing young people psychologically to be productive in conventional society. The Omega Boys Club uses a 36-week college preparatory

course that combines academic and skills training with sessions devoted to themes of respect, friendship, the media, and other issues often confronted by youth in urban environments. The success of the program is often attributed to the focus on addressing the “code of the street” mentality and orienting youth towards a more pro-social and productive lifestyle.

SHANNON HIGHLIGHT: YOUTHBUILD LAWRENCE

YouthBuild Lawrence serves youth ages 18-with a variety of challenges such as a lack of positive role models, transportation, family support, and childcare. At the time of our interview, none of their students had high school degrees, many struggle with mental health and substance abuse issues, and others are involved with street gangs. Despite these challenges, YouthBuild Lawrence has established a solid track record of working with these youth.

YouthBuild Lawrence uses several best practice approaches that increase the likelihood of success. First, they conduct an assessment on each youth which identifies the areas in most need of services. This assessment includes TABE testing, a one-hour information session, and personal interviews with several staff members. Secondly, their programs are comprehensive and focus on several areas of youth development such as GED or high school completion training, counseling and support services, career development services, and skills training (e.g., carpentry). Third, they offer credentialing which indicates satisfactory achievement in programs such as a certificate of completion of program cycle, certificate of completion of leadership development, and certificate of basic safety and hand tool recognition.

SHANNON HIGHLIGHT : WORCESTER YOUTH CENTER

The Worcester Youth Center (WYC) has a program in which they engage and work with youth to provide training and work opportunities. Youth entering the program are current or former gang members, have been referred by the courts, or have been disengaged from school or work. The program has two main components: 1) structured morning programs for youth and 2) afternoon drop-in recreational activities. Youth may enter and exit the program freely while taking advantage of basketball courts, video games, and a recording studio. This allows the youth to feel comfortable and provides the staff with an opportunity to engage the youth. “We take the time to get to know their issues,” says the center’s director. After building a relationship with the youth, they are in a better position to ask them to join their formal structured morning programs like GED and pre-GED classes and the work readiness program.

The center’s director states that most of their youth want to be employed. Staff start with an intake assessment and are likely also to conduct a full work readiness/career inventory. Through strong collaboration with local employers such as industrial supplier Grainger, youth are able to be placed into jobs that fit their personality and their skills. Youth also have opportunities to enroll in a culinary arts program at a local college or take vocational school tracks. These opportunities, however, have grown more difficult to come by as waiting lists for these programs have increased dramatically in the past few years.

One particular challenge the WYC notes has been youth that are unable to advance or keep jobs over a period of time. Many youth need long-term follow-up. In the past few years, WYC has offered new services to assist youth. They brought in local lawyers to offer trainings on encounters with police, had the Worcester Police Gang Unit join in for a basketball league, and hired an ambassador of mentoring to build bridges with the business community.

EMPLOYMENT PROGRAMS FOR THE HIGHEST-RISK AND GANG-INVOLVED YOUTH

Youth with a history of extensive delinquency and gang involvement are typically the most difficult to engage for training and securing employment. Unlike the other two categories of youth previously discussed, these youth are often more resistant to change and require active supervision and reinforcement by program staff. They are heavily involved with the criminal justice system including having spent time in prison and/or juvenile detention, tend to be older and have been out of the conventional educational system, unengaged with community organizations, or homeless.

CHALLENGES

In addition to often having a criminal record, these youth continue to have close ties with gang members or associates, two of the most significant challenges to removing youth from their current lifestyle and persuading them to contemplate legitimate employment. Many of these youth have been incarcerated, are actively involved in violence, or are known to the justice system as having a very high risk of offending. These youth also typically have low educational attainment, have little or no employment history, and may have substance abuse issues. Not only do youth employment programs need to assist these youth in developing the educational and social skills required to navigate the workforce, they will likely have to find strategies to change the behavior and attitudes of individuals who are deeply involved in delinquency and street life.

Youth that have dropped out of school and have prior arrests face several additional challenges that may discourage them from seriously pursuing formal employment opportunities. As one young person said, “I didn’t need no high school degree or GED, fancy clothes, to wake up early or any of that to be employed and make good money. All I needed to do was walk down the street, talk to my boys, get a bag and sell it.” This youth described his many years

“working the streets” as walking blind looking for the right direction but instead running into walls, and he said he “learned to see” after he joined the YouthBuild program. The YouthBuild program provided a strong support system both from his classmates and the reinforcement of his teachers and mentors. After a year in the program taking classes, this young man succeeded in attaining his GED.

Nationally, over half a million individuals return to the community each year from state and federal prisons (Travis and Petersilia, 2001). Since many of the highest risk youth will be returning to their former neighborhoods from jail, residential placement, or prison, they will need intensive aftercare programming. To prepare these youth for employment it is not enough to work only on developing skills directly related to employment or education. These individuals need assistance with basic issues such as preparing for life in the community and developing relationships with family and neighbors, and it may even be necessary to incorporate a system of social control to monitor these youth once they are back in the community. One Shannon CSI program surveyed stressed the importance of having an outreach worker regularly in contact with youth to ensure they stay involved with the program. Additional services may be required if substance abuse or mental health issues exist (OJJDP, 2000).

Securing jobs for this highest risk cohort is especially challenging. Employers for certain jobs (e.g., working with children or other vulnerable populations) may be mandated to check the job applicants CORI⁵. Previous and current gang members may have trouble seeking employment in neighborhoods with rival gangs or the same neighborhood of individuals with whom they have conflicts. These issues are unique and problematic but not hopeless. The first

⁵ For more information about when an employer can access an individuals criminal record, or if the employer is mandated to check their CORI, visit www.lawlib.state.ma.us/subject/about/cori.html or www.masslegalservices.org/coridreader.

step is to understand and identify these challenges which include, but are not limited to, the issues below provided to us by Shannon CSI sites we interviewed:

- **Returning from long-term incarceration/detention.** Following release, many offenders lack essential tools to successfully reintegrate back into the community. Some of these needs include a stable place to live, identification (birth certificate, identification card, etc.), a plan to keep up with necessary medications (if applicable), and assistance in meeting the requirements of release such as conditions of probation or parole (Winnick and Bodkin, 2008).
- **Lure of gang and street culture.** Youth of the highest risk are most resistant to change and most require active outreach efforts. These youth are often gang members and/or drug dealers committed to a street mentality.
- **Threats of retaliation.** Because of their gang involvement and/or violent behavior in the past, many of the highest risk youth are in conflict with other individuals and gangs. This may impact where they are able to travel to get services or where they can get a job due to the threat of retaliation from rivals.
- **Lack of conventional skills.** These youth lack skills for employment and often lack any conventional skills that would help them with their adult lives. These would include skills and knowledge often taken for granted by those in conventional society such as how to respect employers, manage conflict, and deal with anger.

It is also worth mentioning that an additional challenge for programs working with these individuals is the intense time and resource commitment needed. Given their background, multiple needs, lack of skills and barriers to employment, programs must commit to these youth time, effort, and energy in multiple areas in order to facilitate getting them on the right life course and keeping them there. Programs often must work closely with youth for several months to several years to assist these highest risk individuals gain the skills and training and life skills to secure consistent and legitimate employment.

PROMISING PROGRAMMATIC STRATEGIES

Due to the many challenges to prepare the highest-risk and gang-involved youth for employment, when developing programs agencies should consider the strategies below:

- **Provide pre-release services.** If individuals are incarcerated, programs should not wait until the individuals return to the community to start making plans for the transition back into society (Brown et al., 2002; OJJDP, 2002). Individuals will also have to understand

how their CORI will impact their job search as well as other opportunities for stability such as public housing.

- **Use a case management system.** Simply providing a youth a job is not enough. Follow-up, progress monitoring, and long-term services are needed to ensure these youth stay on a positive life course (OJJDP, 2000).
- **Provide legal services.** Youth on probation or parole after being released from correctional facilities or who have many arrests and court appearances on their record (CORI) will have legal requirements they must meet. Some Shannon CSI sites have brought lawyers to speak at their programs to help individuals navigate the legal systems and inform them of their rights. Such assistance will be critical at this stage.⁶
- **Provide credentialing.** Many individuals have experienced “turning points” in which they have moved beyond their criminal past and have made substantive changes in their life. Shannon CSI sites have offered these youth the opportunity to be recognized and credited for their efforts toward short and long-term achievements. Credentialing offers a documented way in which ex-offenders can demonstrate these achievements to potential employers.
- **Hire a staff liaison.** Several Shannon CSI sites use an employee to collaborate with community employers willing to train and work with high-risk and gang-involved youth. The liaison would also ensure proper placement of youth.
- **Utilize a step process.** Shannon CSI partners interviewed strongly encouraged the value of building attachments to adults in the workforce. Learning new skill sets from supportive adult managers during the first employment experience can provide the psychological support these youth need to take the next step toward a more “meaningful” position or job.

The following are programs nationally and locally that allow for an investigation into successful strategies dealing with this challenging group of individuals.

Homeboy Industries

This program from Los Angeles, California focuses on high-risk individuals, many of whom are currently or were formerly involved in gangs and are presently or were previously incarcerated. The mainstay of their efforts relies on a case management system. Because these individuals will have myriad risk factors and issues that need to be addressed, the first stage is developing a one-on-one plan for each individual participant. This is essential to ensure that

⁶ Policies and laws exist in each state regarding the expungement, sealing, pardoning, and purging of offenders’ records as well as tax breaks, bonding, and insurance available for employers who hire ex-offenders (see Rodriguez and Petersilia [2006] for a discussion of these topics). For policies in Massachusetts regarding state laws related to these topics see Love and Frazier, 2006.

participants, particularly those recently released, have both long-term and short-term plans. The case management approach aids in the process by ensuring that participants are getting the support and services they need from providers as well as by monitoring their individual progress. This close supervision and relationship has been shown successful not only at Homeboy Industries but also in similar programs that work with high-risk youth.

Employment for ex-offenders and ex-gang members is a primary focus of Homeboy Industries. They have personnel dedicated to assisting participants find employment. Known as “employment counselors” or “job developers,” these individuals work with employers to develop mutually beneficial relationships and encourage them to hire their clients. They also work one-on-one with participants to develop resumes, strengthen interviewing skills, and find jobs that are a good match. This case management and personalized approach is necessary for high-risk offenders and likely contributes to the success Homeboy Industries has had in finding employment for their clients.

SHANNON HIGHLIGHT: ROCA TRANSITIONAL EMPLOYMENT PROGRAM

“We choose them, they don’t choose us.” - Roca Staff Member

The Roca Transitional Employment Program targets the highest-risk youth in the community. These youth often do not want to change and are stuck in what program staff calls the “pre-contemplation stage” where they have not yet seriously considered conventional employment. As the quote above illustrates, these youth tend to be committed to alternative activities such as drug dealing, gangs, and violence. Case managers, or youth workers, often have to go back to the streets to get their young people back into programs. While the program is dedicated to employment, other services, such as youth counseling and drug treatment, are offered to those who need it.

The Transitional Employment (TE) program uses a step model requiring an individual to first retain a job for three months. As part of the TE program, the youth are mandated to come to Roca one day a week for training which ranges from GED classes to professional development to vocational skills. If a particular youth shows interest, they offer the youth a “short burst” class which is 4 class trainings over 8 hours. Completing this training demonstrates to Roca the youth is moving to the “contemplation” stage, where they begin to consider employment, and the youth is given a certificate of completion. They are then offered a 24-hour training class which ends with an advanced Roca certificate and an opportunity to be referred to the carpenters union or construction classes to have advanced training and something to place on their resumes.

After the youth completes the first employment step, they are offered advanced employment opportunities from local employers such as the MBTA. These positions are subsidized by Roca to encourage employer participation and buy-in and offer the youth the opportunity to work alongside others and under a supervisor for real wages.

After completing the advanced employment opportunity, they work with a job developer to find full-time employment. This is the “action” stage. Roca has found success working with the food industry where there are several opportunities to explore different growth opportunities. They are also found opportunities to place their youth in employers providing “green” cleaning and building maintenance.

These steps often take from several months to years of commitment by Roca and the youth. These youth are the most challenging for stable, long term employment. To ensure follow-up, each youth is assigned a youth worker, who is responsible for making at least three contacts with their clients per week. Roca is realistic in their efforts. As one staff member puts it, “we are just getting them to the starting line.”

SHANNON HIGHLIGHT: NEW DIRECTIONS OF NEW BEDFORD

The New Directions program of New Bedford operates according to the Federal Workforce Investment Act (WIA). This requires the program to work with the most at-risk youth in the community. This program also provides services for lower-risk youth as well. The challenges faced by this population are many. Clients may be homeless, gang-involved, or court-involved. Many have been involved in the justice system.

This program uses many best practices approaches in working with youth. Two approaches that are particularly relevant to this category of at-risk youth include working with incarcerated youth prior to release and conducting follow-up with clients out of the main programs. The Career Center’s reentry staff works with youth “behind the wall.” One of the first steps is to link these youth with the Youth Services Department of New Directions to start on a plan before release. All clients are followed up with for one year after the initial program has ended. Employers are generally followed-up with as well, particularly a few months after the youth has completed the program.

CONCLUSION

Research illustrates that employment can be beneficial when it is part of a comprehensive set of services available to the youth. Programs that attempt job placement only have been found to fail and in some instances even increase delinquency. Many national and local models provide examples of effective youth employment programs and serve to highlight successful strategies to employ youth of varying risk profiles.

CHALLENGES

There appears to be a set of general challenges for all youth seeking employment, for youth that have been actively involved in a gang or are at-risk for gang-involvement, and for programs that serve this population. These challenges can be divided into three categories:

Challenges for all youth seeking employment:

- Decreased number of jobs available;
- Older, more experienced workers competing for entry-level jobs;
- Limited access to employment and vocational programs as a result of budget cuts.

Challenges for at-risk and gang-involved youth:

- Low educational attainment;
- Poor family and peer relationships;
- Lack of prior job skills;
- Lack personal support systems and mentors;
- Health and substance abuse issues;
- Unrealistic expectations.

Challenges for youth employment programs serving highest-risk and gang-involved youth:

- Youth employment programs are required to exert a high degree of time, effort, and energy to adequately address youth;
- Resources are often limited to support high-intensity case management programming;
- Building and maintaining relationships with employers that are often hesitant to take risks in challenging business conditions.

These challenges can become overwhelming to youth trying to “go straight” by seeking legitimate employment and programs to assist them. At the beginning of this paper, we identified two major functions common to the research and interviews we conducted with youth employment programs. Assessing and preparing youth for employment, the most basic functions

in a youth employment program, are just part of the efforts of programs we highlighted nationally and as a part of the Shannon CSI. In addition to these common functions, many youth employment programs incorporate additional elements into their programming which support youth growth and development towards achieving sustained legitimate employment. These elements below we offer as recommendations to include as part of any Shannon CSI site youth employment strategy.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR YOUTH EMPLOYMENT PROGRAMS

1. Develop ongoing collaboration among service providers, community organizations, and the justice system.

As the director of programs and services at CareerPoint in Holyoke stated, youth employment programs cannot be all things to all youth. They provide a number of services to youth, but they “thrive on collaborations” to help youth overcome housing, transportation, education, and health issues. Youth will often present a diverse set of risk factors that must be addressed prior to a youth being ready for employment. Ongoing collaboration among other service providers, community organizations, and the justice system can assist a youth and the youth employment programs address these diverse risk factors.

2. Use a case management system for monitoring and assisting youth both during the programs and after completion.

As we have highlighted often in this resource guide, youth employment programs are not solely employment destinations for young people. Often, successful programs also have education and vocational classes, mentors, counselors, and outreach workers. A case management system is a critical tool for youth employment programs to help assess a youth’s progress and determine if a new course is needed. It also requires continuous follow-up with the youth to improve the likelihood that the youth, if discouraged, will continue in the program. Case management, however, does not end with successful placement of the youth

in a job. Youth may struggle with the rigors of employment or run into familial challenges (e.g., day care or housing issues) where a case manager can be the safety net to ensure the youth receives the support services they require to maintain the employment.

3. Utilize a job placement specialist to identify businesses that are willing to train and hire youth with varying risk factors.

During our interviews with Shannon CSI partners, we heard over and over again the importance of a person that works both with the youth in their programs and directly with business and community partners identifying potential new employment opportunities for youth. This job placement specialist should meet with youth prior to employment placement to gain a sense of the youth's skill sets and expectations of employment. They should also clearly explain to the business partner the youth's background and how the youth's skill set might help the business. Recent research on desistance from criminal offending shows that "almost all individuals who successfully go straight often seem to rely on a 'personal voucher' – a person of good moral standing who will act as a witness to their reformed character" (Maruna et al., 2004: 275). By being clear and direct with both the youth and the business partner, a job placement specialist can set clear expectations for both the youth and the employer and increase the likelihood of a successful match.

4. Identify grant and assistance programs that offer stipends to youth employment programs that reduce the risk employers face when hiring at-risk youth.

Offering stipends to pay all or a portion of a youth's early employment wages is often the motivation an employer needs when considering whether to hire an at-risk or gang-involved youth from a youth employment agency. By limiting the risk to their bottom line during the first few months of a youth's employment, business partners can train the youth, determine if the youth's skill set matches the jobs requirements, and observe if the youth can work well

with others and follow directions. After a fixed period of time, the business partner can then determine if the youth is ready for full time employment.

5. Offer youth opportunities to become credentialed.

In this current economic climate, jobs are scarce and older more experienced individuals are competing with youth for entry-level jobs. Several opportunities exist for youth to take a class or training that provides the youth with a certificate of completion that a youth can put on a resume as an indication of their commitment and skills. Some summer jobs, in fact, require youth to receive a Workplace Readiness Certificate which is a ten-hour program endorsed by the Regional Employment Board. Vocational opportunities have also been popular within Shannon CSI programs. Trainings in the culinary, construction, green energy, musical recording, and cosmetology have all been mentioned as credentialing opportunities for at-risk and gang-involved youth.

It is important to remember that while change is certainly challenging for those youth most at-risk in the community, change is possible. The youth and the youth employment program must remain committed to one another as an at-risk and gang-involved youth can easily be discouraged when viewing the long-term commitment and the many steps they must take to become ready for employment. They struggle with peer and familial pressures that often discourage them from making the time commitment to gain a GED, take a vocational class, or to otherwise become more prepared for the workforce. However, the internal spark of youth ready and willing to change their lives, coupled with assistance from social support services, has been proven to be turning points in the life course of at-risk youth (Maruna et al., 2004). As one Shannon CSI partner told us, “Our work is based on hope and possibility. No one else in their world has that feeling for them. They are trying to do something different and it is our job to bring out that infectious feeling that anything is possible.”

REFERENCES

- Apel, Robert, and Catherine Kaukinen. 2008. On the relationship between family structure and antisocial behavior: Parental cohabitation and blended households. *Criminology* 46(1):35-70.
- Bachman, Jerald G., and John Schulenberg. 1993. How part-time work intensity relates to drug use, problem behavior, time use, and satisfaction among high-school seniors: Are these consequences or merely correlates? *Developmental Psychology* 29:220-235.
- Brown, David, Sarah Maxwell, Edward DeJesus, and Vincent Schiraldi. 2002. *Barriers and Promising Approaches to Workforce and Youth Development for Youth Offenders*. Baltimore: Annie E. Casey Foundation.
- Bullis, Michael, Hill M. Walker, and Jeffrey R. Sprague. 2001. A promise unfulfilled: Social skills training with at-risk and antisocial children and youth. *Exceptionality* 9(1&2):67-90.
- Frey, Heather E. 1999. Employment and training for court-involved youth: An overview. U.S. Department of Justice. Office of Justice Programs. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.
- Greenberger, Ellen, and Laurence D. Steinberg. 1986. *When Teenagers Work: The Psychological and Social Costs of Adolescent Employment*. New York: Basic Books.
- Love, Margaret C. and April Frazier. 2006. Certificates of rehabilitation and other forms of relief from the collateral consequences of conviction: A survey of state laws. In *Second Chances in the Criminal Justice System: Alternative to Incarceration and Reentry Strategies*, ed. ABA Commission on Effective Criminal Sanctions. Washington DC: American Bar Association.
- Maruna, Shadd, Thomas P. LeBel, Nick Mitchell, and Michelle Naples. 2004. Pygmalion in the reintegration process: Desistence from crime through the looking glass. *Psychology, Crime & Law* 10(3):271-281.
- MassLegalHelp. Retrieved on July 19th 2010 from Northeastern University at: www.masslegalhelp.org.
- OJJDP. 2000. *Employment and Training for Court Involved Youth*. U.S. Department of Justice. Office of Justice Programs. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.
- Parker, Karen F., and Amy Reckdenwald. 2008. Concentrated disadvantage, traditional male role models, and African-American juvenile violence. *Criminology* 46(3):711-735.
- Patterson, Gerald R., John B. Reid, and Thomas J. Dishion. 1992. *Antisocial Boys*. Eugene: Castalia.

- Rodriguez, Robert, and Joan Petersilia. (2006). Building an Employment Bridge: Making Ex-Offenders Marketable, Getting Employers to the Table, and Increasing the Likelihood of an Employment Connection. California Prison Reform. Available at: http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=976999
- Sampson, Robert J., and John H. Laub. (1993). *Crime in the making: Pathways and turning points through life*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Spergel, Irving, Ron Chance, Kenneth Ehrensaft, Thomas Regulus, Candice Kane, Robert Laseter, Alba Alexander, and Sandra Oh. 1994. *Gang Suppression and Intervention: Community Models*. U.S. Department of Justice. Office of Justice Programs. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.
- Sum, Andrew, Ishwar Khatiwada, Joseph McLaughlin, and Sheila Palma. 2009. *The consequences of dropping out of high school: Joblessness and jailing for high school dropouts*. Boston: Center for Labor Market Studies – Northeastern University.
- Sum, Andrew, Ishwar Khatiwada, and Joseph McLaughlin. 2010. *The lost decade for teen and young adult employment in Illinois: The current depression in the labor market for 16-24 year olds in the nation and state*. Boston: Center for Labor Market Studies – Northeastern University.
- Travis, Jeremy, and Joan Petersilia. 2001. Reentry reconsidered: A new look at an old question. *Crime & Delinquency* 47(3):291-313.
- Travis, Jeremy, and Joan Petersilia. 2001. Reentry reconsidered: A new look at an old question. *Crime & Delinquency* 47(3):291-313.
- Winnick, Terri A., and Mark Bodkin. 2008. Anticipated stigma and the stigma management among those to be labeled “ex-con.” *Deviant Behavior* 29(4):295-333.

APPENDIX – ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Publications

Boston Youth Network

Full Report - <http://www.bostonyouthnet.org/docs/Needs%20Assessment%20Appendices.pdf>

Center for Labor Market Studies – Northeastern University

Publications Page - <http://www.clms.neu.edu/publication/>

Employment and Training for Court Involved Youth

Factsheet - <http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/fs99102.pdf>

Full Report - <http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/ojdp/182787.pdf>

Workforce and Youth Development

Full Report - <http://www.aecf.org/upload/publicationfiles/barriers%20and%20promising.pdf>

The CORI Reader

Full Report – <http://www.masslegalservices.org/corireader>

Programs

Homeboy Industries

Website - <http://www.homeboy-industries.org/>

Hull Lifesaving Museum

Website - <http://www.lifesavingmuseum.org/>

Omega Boys Club

Website - <http://www.street-soldiers.org/contents.htm>

YouthBuild USA

Website - <http://www.YouthBuild.org/site/c.htlRI3PIKoG/b.1223921/k.BD3C/Home.htm>

Other

ABA Commission on Effective Criminal Sanctions

Website Document - http://www.saferfoundation.org/docs/AllStates-BriefingSheet91906_2_.pdf

Criminal Offender Record Information (CORI)

Website - <http://www.masslegalhelp.org/cori>

Website – <http://www.lawlib.state.ma.us/subject/about/cori.html>

Department of Labor/Massachusetts Department of Labor and Workforce Development

Federal website- <http://www.dol.gov/>

Massachusetts website – www.mass.gov/eolwd

National Association of Workforce Boards

Website - <http://www.nawb.org/>

Massachusetts Office of the Attorney General

<http://www.mass.gov/ago/youthemployment>

ADDENDUM 1

CORI Reform changes signed into law on August 6, 2010:

Chapter 256 of the Acts of 2010

- Increased access through web-based forum
- Reduces the look-back period from 15 years to 10 for felonies, and from 10 years to 5 for misdemeanors
- Provides liability protection for employers who rely on the state system
- Includes “ban the box” provision – this prevents employers from asking about criminal records as part of the initial application, but allowing inquiries later on in the interview process
- Carves out an exception from the ban-the-box provision for employers – primarily in the financial-service industry who are statutorily or regulatory prohibited from hiring certain ex-offenders
- An employer in possession of the applicants CORI must provide the applicant a copy of the record prior to questioning the applicant about his criminal history. Additionally, if an employer makes a decision adverse to the applicant on the basis of his criminal history, the employer must provide the applicant a copy of the criminal record if they have not done so already.
- An employer conducting five or more criminal background investigations annually shall maintain a written criminal offender record information policy.
- Maintains current level of access for law enforcement officials to all CORI, including sealed records, while also maintaining the same level of access for those employers currently granted access in statute