

Resources for the Prevention of Sexual Abuse



NEARI PRESS & TRAINING CENTER

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By David Prescott and Alisa Klein

### “Applying Positive Psychology to Illuminate the Needs of Adolescent Males Transitioning Out of Juvenile Detention”

#### AUTHORS

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#### THE QUESTIONS

How can we best move beyond employing risk-and deficit-based models and focus on helping adolescents to prevent further crime? Can we use a strengths-based approach rooted in principles of positive psychology and self-determination theory to encourage a better, crime-free life for young offenders returning to their communities?

#### THE RESEARCH

Understanding the risk factors that contribute to new crimes is important, but a new focus on adolescents’ strengths to help them to achieve a life without crime has emerged in recent years. This study interviewed young male offenders involved in a voluntary mentorship program, their mentors, and a caseworker, about their experiences as the young offenders transitioned from a detention facility back into their communities. The researchers sought to identify the common themes and key motivating factors that encouraged the young offenders’ desistance from re-offending upon re-entry. The researcher conducted semi-structured open-ended interviews with all of the youth participants over three time periods:

1. While the young men were in the detention facility;

2. Three to six months following their re-entry into the community; and
3. Nine to 18 months following their re-entry into the community.

By also gathering the perspectives of the mentors and caseworker, the researchers sought to explore whether or not they had similar or different perspectives from the youth about their re-entry process. The mentors and caseworker were interviewed towards the end of the study or kept journals of their mentees' experiences throughout the entire period.

## **RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS**

The authors found that the young men participating in the study shared some common emotions associated with their re-entry. These included a desire for a better life and a sense of fear about returning to their old lives that had led them to offending. The authors also found three key themes – all aligned closely with three primary goals of self determination theory – that drove the plans and actions of the participants before their release and after their return home:

1. Relatedness: a strong desire to reconnect with family and partners after they had “burnt a lot of bridges;”
2. Competency: the desire to be enrolled in training, find work, earn a living, develop social aptitude and confidence, and make healthy and safe choices; and
3. Autonomy: management of their relationships with their previous peer groups in a way that would allow them to remain in control of their actions, along with gaining access to every day freedoms like, “being able to wear my own clothes and being able to walk down the street.”

The researchers noted that over the period of transition, the nature and weight of these needs shifted and varied.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR PROFESSIONALS**

This study provides further empirical support for positive, strengths-based approaches such as those described by Kevin Powell and many others in NEARI Press books such as *Current Applications* and *Very Different Voices*. These findings also illustrate how professionals treating youth do well to remember that adolescents of all backgrounds have goals that they share with all other humans. These include the desire for relatedness, autonomy, and competence. Interventions that incorporate these goals will likely benefit adolescents more than those that focus simply on risks.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FIELD**

Our field has its roots both in the promotion of healthy lives for clients and community safety more broadly. Considerable energy has gone into studying risk factors and treatment needs; however, early exploration was typically deficit-based and did not focus on identifying how best to develop empirically supported strengths based approaches. Our historical risk- and deficits-based emphasis was certainly understandable in the context in which it occurred. These findings point to the fact that it is time to expand our knowledge and practice.

## **ABSTRACT**

Reducing the recidivism of young offenders is a critical research issue, not only to enhance the future outcomes for the young person but also to reduce the future risk to the community. Navigating the immediate transition from detention back into the community is positioned as a critical milestone. This small qualitative study describes how young offenders participating in a formal mentoring program in Australia experienced the transition from detention to the community and the intrinsic drivers of their behaviour throughout this transition. Perspectives of their mentors and caseworker were also solicited. Importantly, their stories were interpreted through the lens of positive psychology and self-determination theory to discuss the relevance of one's pursuit of autonomy, relatedness, and competence. Increasing our understanding of these intrinsic motivators will assist young offenders to pursue a better life away from crime and benefit both themselves and the wider community

## **CITATION**

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