Doing time, filling time: Bureaucratic ritualism as a systemic barrier to youth reentry

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ABSTRACT

This paper contributes to knowledge about the challenges of youth reentry by examining how transitional services can function as a barrier to – instead of a support for – healthy reintegration of youth. Using participant observation conducted in 2003–2004 at a juvenile aftercare program in Philadelphia, we explore a pervasive problem that Merton (1940) termed "bureaucratic ritualism." Case workers and administrators became beholden to daily demands related to billing, paperwork, and meeting minimum standards, supplanting the larger goal of individualized care for young people returning from placements. Outputs, not outcomes, became the measure of success. We identify a number of reintegration activities that were ritualistic in nature and explore the features of the system that encouraged ritualistic responses by aftercare workers. Finally, we identify a group of aftercare workers, which we call "proactive caregivers" who resisted the organizational pressures to become bureaucratic ritualists.

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1. Introduction

Although an impressive literature has developed around adult prisoner reentry, youth returning from confinement have received comparatively little attention. Depending on how broadly the concepts of "youth" and "confinement" are measured, between 81,000 and 200,000 young people are released into communities annually (Mears & Travis, 2004; Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2012). Scholars who have studied the issue point out that the reentry process is unique for adolescents, who must undergo a "dual transition" from facility to community and from adolescence into young adulthood (Altschuler & Brash, 2004). Young people encounter some of the same challenges as their adult counterparts, such as finding employment and redefining their role within their families and households upon their return (Petersilia, 2005). Others, such as being reintegrated into schools or negotiating relationships with delinquent peers are specific to youth. The educational deficiencies faced by these incarcerated youth are particularly striking. Summarizing their earlier work (Osgood, Foster, Flanagan, & Ruth, 2005) Osgood, Foster, and Courtney (2010) report that fewer than 20% of young adults incarcerated as juveniles or adults have diplomas or GEDs. As with adults, the likelihood of failure is high. Within five years of release, as many as 85% youth are re-arrested (Trulson, Marquart, Mullings, & Caeti, 2005).

Aftercare programs and post-release supervision are designed to facilitate a smooth transition from facility to community during a period of time in which young people are particularly likely to encounter problems that place them at risk for re-offending (Altschuler, 1984; Altschuler & Armstrong, 1994; Gies, 2003). In preparation for this reintegration phase, aftercare workers and/or juvenile probation officers help youths become re-enrolled in school, work with the young person's family to ensure that there is a stable home environment, connect youths to employment opportunities, and locate other community-based services that fit their clients' individual needs. In addition to these support services, supervisory services require young people to meet conditions of their release, such as paying restitution, participating in community service activities, and passing regular drug screens. Juvenile aftercare programs come in many forms and have varying levels of success. Because of the wide range of programs and the lack of fidelity to program models in some jurisdictions, it is difficult to generalize about the overall effectiveness of aftercare services. However, despite the lack of widespread agreement, many have argued convincingly that high-quality transitional support services for youth offer them the best chances for success on the outside (Mears, Shollenberger, Willison, Owens, & Butts, 2008; Mears & Travis, 2004; Spencer & Jones-Walker, 2004; Young, 2004).

Research in other areas of the criminal justice system and in organizational theory more broadly suggests that staff are a particularly important component because they interpret and apply organizational policy (Cicourel, 1968; Schneider, 1987; Wise, 2004). As with any street level bureaucracy (Lipsky, 1980), service delivery workers have a great deal of discretion in how to carry out their jobs (e.g. Brodkin, 1997; Halliday, Burns, Hutton, McNeill, & Tata, 2009; Lowe, Dawson-Edwards, Minor, & Wells, 2008; Maupin, 1993; Meyers, Glaser, & McDonald, 1998; Sandfort, 1999). As a result, we argue that both workers and the larger systemic

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context in which reentry organizations operate are important, but largely overlooked, aspects of youth reentry.

In this article, we examine the obstacles to successful reentry from the perspectives of juvenile aftercare workers as they responded to the organizational dilemmas and constraints posed by the juvenile justice system in one large jurisdiction. Our findings suggest that a pervasive problem in the system of aftercare services is what Merton (1940) termed "bureaucratic ritualism," where the goals of the organization or system are replaced by rigid adherence to rules. Workers and administrators become beholden to daily demands related to billing, paperwork, and meeting minimum standards, losing sight of the larger picture of providing individualized care to vulnerable young people returning home from residential placements. We identify a number of reintegration activities that are ritualistic in nature and explore the features of the system that encourage ritualistic responses by aftercare workers. We describe a group of aftercare workers, which we call "proactive caregivers" who resist the organizational pressures to become bureaucratic ritualists. Finally, we discuss the promising role of such workers in improving the quality and effectiveness of aftercare services.

2. Effectiveness of youth reentry programming

Despite a decline in the past decade, a large number of youth in the juvenile justice system are still placed in residential facilities. In 2010, it was estimated that more than 81,000 youth were confined within the juvenile justice system on any given day, not counting youth in adult prisons or jails (OJJDP, 2012). Unfortunately, the data suggest that residential placement does little to change behavior, with re-arrest rates ranging from 55% in a 12-month follow up period (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006) to as high as 85% within five years of release (Trulson et al., 2005). Because of these failures, practitioners have directed their attention towards programs designed to facilitate the adjustment from confinement to community through a mix of supervision and service delivery. These programs are commonly referred to as "aftercare" and have followed three main models.

The first model of aftercare, known as the "traditional model," combines supervision by the juvenile justice system with a casework/advocacy approach (Ellsworth, 2003). These programs, often short in duration, employ caseworkers who encourage youth to find jobs or go back to school, and engage in pro-social activities, often at the program site or through organized activities off-site. However, because this model was first introduced in the 1960s, there is a lack of quality research to support the contention that simple casework and supervision alone are enough to have a substantial impact on behavior and recidivism (Ellsworth, 2003).

In the 1980s, in an effort to address concerns about the quality of interactions occurring between youth and their caseworkers, traditional programs soon began adopting practices that required increased contact for youth and reduced caseloads for workers. This model is referred to as an "intensive supervision" model of aftercare. Despite the logical assumption that increased contact would lead to better service delivery, several studies show that the increased level of contact that is the hallmark of such programs may not be effective at reducing the propensity to offend (e.g. Barton & Butts, 1990; Elrod & Minor, 1992; Greenwood, Deschenes, & Adams, 1993; Minor & Elrod, 1990; Weibush, 1993). Overall, it appeared that intensive supervision could not be achieved simply with reduced caseloads, and that when close contact was achieved, it did not lead to reduced recidivism (Clear & Hardyman, 1990).

Due to the lack of success of the traditional and intensive supervision models of aftercare, Altschuler and Armstrong developed what they called the "intensive aftercare program," or IAP. This model is designed to address the problems found in both the traditional and intensive supervision models. Driven by theory and empirical research, the IAP model is a comprehensive approach that blends individual, family, and community perspectives to situate the reentry experience within a larger continuum of coordination between multiple agencies at different stages of the confinement and release process (Altschuler & Armstrong, 2004). Despite a strong theoretical rationale, results from a study of three IAP sites found implementation problems in some sites and overall, no statistically significant differences in recidivism between youth participating in IAP and the control groups (Wiebush, Wagner, McNulty, Wang, & Le, 2005).

Another recent trend in aftercare focuses on community-based mentoring and family oriented programs. The purpose of mentoring programs is to engage reentering youth with adult role models to help facilitate their transition and encourage pro-social behavior. Evaluations of mentoring programs show little evidence of significant reductions in recidivism (Bouffard & Bergseth, 2008) and any initial gains in recidivism reduction were lost over time (Drake & Barnowski, 2006). Programs such as Multi-Systemic Therapy (MST) and Functional Family Therapy (FFT) have been used to address the role of family systems in the juvenile reentry process. These programs, such as the Washington State Family Integrated Transitions (FIT) program, show great promise, with treatment group recidivism rates of 27% compared to 40.6% in the control group (Aos, 2004). A meta-analysis by Drake, Aos, and Miller (2009) found that the average FFT program reduced recidivism rates by 18.1%. MST interventions show similar significant reductions in recidivism when compared to regular court services (Timmons-Mitchell, Bender, Kishna, & Mitchell, 2006).

However, as the literature has demonstrated, even the most intensive and promising efforts (such as IAP) do not always work as envisioned. Recent studies have found that aftercare failure may occur for a variety of reasons. As one example, programs have yet to determine a "tipping point" of program duration that provides the desired reductions in recidivism (Kurlychek, Wheeler, Tinik, & Kempinen, 2010). Moreover, Abrams and Snyder (2010) suggest that the success of family-oriented programs is due to the power and importance of larger social and environmental contexts such as families and neighborhoods, and that previous incarnations of aftercare programs failed because of their individual focus. We suggest a third reason for failure: staff adaptations to organizational constraints. Our findings on the daily experience of providing aftercare services and the organizational structure of one large aftercare program may provide some context for understanding why theoretically-sound aftercare program designs do not translate into improved results.

3. Contribution and theoretical foundation

This article contributes to the literature on youth reentry by going beyond program evaluation to explore the barriers created by the system itself (Thompkins, 2010). It is in some ways an extension of the research on collateral consequences of incarceration because it focuses on how a system ostensibly designed to rehabilitate youthful offenders, often despite best intentions, makes it more difficult for them to become productive, healthy adults. Moreover, through ethnographic field research, we are able to represent aftercare as it is practiced on a day-to-day basis and as a service delivered by individuals operating within a specific historical and organizational context. In doing so, we ground the discussion of youth reentry within the relevant organizational literatures that account for individuals operating within public service organizations (Lipsky, 1980) and characterize the outcomes of juvenile justice services not as objectively defined, but as negotiated and defined by real people comprising the system (Cicourel, 1967).

The concept of "bureaucratic ritualism" was first proposed to describe adaptations of workers to large bureaucratic organizational structures. Because these organizations were designed to operate on the principles of formal rationality, efficiency, and reliability of response, workers experience pressure from superiors to conform closely to the rules. "But this very emphasis leads to a transference of the sentiments from the *aims* of the organization onto the particular details of behavior required by the rules. Adherence to the rules,