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Justice System is Failing Many Young Adults as They Leave Juvenile Detention or Prison

*New Book Details Risks Confronting Young Adults
and Calls for Policy Changes to Better Prepare an At-risk Group*

November xx, 2005 – Young adults leaving the juvenile justice system or criminal confinement face a particularly difficult transition into adulthood, but they often navigate this transition with inadequate assistance from society, according to new analyses being released this month.

The analyses by several leading researchers document the major challenges facing these at-risk young adults and calls for a concerted response focused on job training, education and other services to help them move into productive adult lives.

The in-depth looks at adults leaving the juvenile and criminal justice systems are documented in four chapters of a major new research collection, “On Your Own Without a Net: The Transition to Adulthood for Vulnerable Populations,” a product of [The MacArthur Research Network on Transitions to Adulthood](#).

The chapters highlight the critical importance of these issues for American society. The juvenile justice system will touch the lives of 10 percent of American youth aged 10 to 17, and tens of thousands will be placed in some form of residential placement each year. Many will remain in such placements into their early adult years. At the same time, the researchers note that 100,000 young adults 24 or younger leave state and federal prisons each year.

As a group, these young adults are more likely than their peers to have not finished high school, to have children outside of marriage and to be unemployed, factors that will complicate their adult lives.

The chapters on juvenile justice acknowledge the need for punishment of delinquent youths, but the authors call for a better balance between punishment and rehabilitation. And they place a premium on providing the kind of psychosocial assistance that all teenagers need as they make transitions into adulthood.

“Society has to do a much better job of providing integrated services to these juveniles, whether it’s drug treatment, mental health counseling, job training or education,” said David M. Altschuler, a principal research scientist at the Johns Hopkins University’s Institute for Policy Studies and the author of one chapter dealing with juvenile justice issues. “These are the tools that all young adults need to thrive as adults.”

Likewise, the book suggests that the criminal justice system should provide more job training and education to inmates and develop an integrated services network for offenders before and after their release. Such programs have proven to be cost-effective in reducing recidivism and future crime.

“Research is showing that young inmates need individualized support before and after they return to their communities,” said Jeremy Travis, president of the John Jay College of Criminal Justice and a co-author of one chapter dealing with criminal justice issues. “We find that some states and communities are looking seriously at these issues, but society should have an aggressive and well-planned strategy to provide the services this young adult population needs. Without it, we are, in effect, writing off many of these young people’s lives.”

Issues involving the juvenile justice system are documented in two chapters written by He Len Chung, Michelle Little and Laurence Steinberg, and by David M. Altschuler.

Two other chapters examine issues involving the adult criminal justice system and were written by Christopher Uggen and Sara Wakefield and Jeremy Travis and Christy A. Visher.

“[On Your Own Without a Net,](#)” which is being published by the University of Chicago Press, will be a valuable resource for policy makers, elected officials, advocates, researchers, journalists and members of the public interested in society’s response to the overwhelming needs of youth leaving the juvenile justice or criminal justice systems, as well as other special situations.

The book is part of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Series on Mental Health and Development, a series of more than 20 policy- and research-oriented books published since 1987.

The book is available at many book stores and can be ordered through the [University of Chicago Press](#), at 1-800-621-8476.

“On Your Own Without a Net: The Transition to Adulthood for Vulnerable Populations,” edited by D. Wayne Osgood, E. Michael Foster, Constance Flanagan and Gretchen R. Ruth. ISBN: 0-226-63783-2.

To help address the needs of young people who are in trouble with the law, the MacArthur Foundation has also launched a new national juvenile justice reform initiative called *Models for Change*, which is designed to help accelerate system-wide reforms that are fair, effective, and recognize the developmental differences between children and adults. The goal is to support programs in the four states selected by MacArthur for participation in the initiative – Pennsylvania, Illinois, Louisiana, and Washington – that can help provide lessons for juvenile justice reform across the nation. Each state will receive up to \$7.5 million over five years.

The Research Network on the Transitions to Adulthood examines the changing nature of early adulthood, and the policies, programs, and institutions that support young people as they move into adulthood. Significant cultural, economic, and demographic changes have occurred in the span of a few generations, and these changes are challenging youths’ psychological and social development. Some are adapting well, but many others are floundering as they prepare to leave home, finish school, find jobs, and start families.

The network is both documenting these cultural and social shifts, and exploring how families, government, and social institutions are shaping the course of young adult’s development. The Network is funded by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation and chaired by University of Pennsylvania sociologist Frank Furstenberg.

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