

# Gender Differences in the Perceived Needs and Barriers of Youth Offenders Preparing for Community Reentry

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**Abstract** This study explored how gender differences may influence the community reentry experiences of incarcerated youth. Structured surveys assessing risk factors for re-offending, perceived reentry needs, and anticipated barriers to meeting these needs were administered to a convenience sample of males ( $n = 36$ ) and females ( $n = 35$ ) who were within 60 days of release from two probation camps in Southern California. Bivariate analyses found significant gender differences in prior risk factors, educational aspirations, expressed mental health needs, anticipated use of services, and reentry concerns. Minimal gender differences were detected in perceived employment needs and barriers and self-efficacy to avoid recidivism. The findings support the need for gender-specific reentry programming in some key areas and also draw attention to the importance of removing barriers to successful reentry for all incarcerated youth.

**Keywords** Reentry · Transition age youth · Juvenile offenders · Gender

## Introduction

Nearly 100,000 juveniles are housed in out-of-home correctional placements on any given day (Snyder and Sickmund 2006). As these youth exit the system and return to their homes and communities, many face uncertain futures as they work to overcome obstacles associated with community reentry. In an effort to help young people achieve reentry success, researchers and practitioners have focused on discovering “best practices” in reentry policies and practices. Although some reentry programs have shown promise, such as mentoring and various family therapies (Abrams and Snyder 2009), scant research has focused on differences within the general population of returning youth, such as gender, race, or age. It is well established that young men and women have distinct sets of risk factors prior to entering and within the confines of the juvenile correctional system

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(Belknap and Holsinger 1998; Bloom and Covington 2001). Building on this literature, this study explores how these gender differences may influence the reentry phase of correctional care. Focusing on youth preparing to exit a correctional camp, we examine gender differences in offenders' prior risks, perceived reentry needs, and anticipated barriers to meeting these needs.

### Youth Reentry: Needs and Outcomes

Youth offenders who are returning home from juvenile correctional institutions are apt to face numerous obstacles as they attempt to re-situate themselves in their home environments. Some youth arguably do well post-incarceration. For example, in their qualitative study of resiliency among adolescent offenders, Todis et al. (2001) found that roughly half of the youth in the sample were employed and/or attending school after a 5-year period. Similarly, Abrams' (2007) qualitative study of young male offenders who exited a year long correctional stay showcased how family support and determination can result in transition success and stability. Despite these reported successes however, the general consensus among experts is that the life challenges and outcomes for reentry youth are lower than those for youth who are from similar economic and social circumstances (Osgood et al. 2005; Snyder 2004).

Many youth offenders will exit the system with the desire to accomplish basic developmental tasks related to schooling or employment, yet these goals are difficult to attain. For example, in their study of over 500 formerly incarcerated youth in Oregon, Bullis and Yovanoff (2002) found that only 30% were enrolled in school or substantially employed at 1 year post release. Additional research has discovered that returning youth offenders commonly struggle to find safe and stable housing after leaving the correctional system, and a high proportion of offenders (estimates lie between 40% and 60%) contend with mental health challenges and/or substance abuse disorders (Altschuler and Brash 2004; Teplin et al. 2002).

The community reentry of youth offenders entails various personal and social challenges as well. Qualitative studies have revealed that formerly incarcerated youth often experience social and psychological difficulties as they reestablish social and familial ties. Many struggle to avoid negative influences and criminal activities as they simultaneously try to reintegrate back into the social networks they once considered as primary and supportive (Abrams 2007). Researchers have also explained that the social stigma associated with having a criminal record can create internal strain and cause returning offenders to doubt their own ability to be successful in life (Mears and Travis 2004; Sullivan 1989).

Many of the challenges associated with juvenile reentry can follow youth into their transition to adulthood. Findings from longitudinal studies have shown that juvenile offenders are likely to experience persistent social problems such as unemployment, low educational attainment, homelessness, and recidivism into the juvenile and adult penal systems (Bullis and Yovanoff 2002; Snyder and Sickmund 2006). These negative outcomes stem in part from exposure to childhood risks that are known to contribute to negative life outcomes, such as child abuse and neighborhood disorganization. Cycles of incarceration can also stifle youths' psychosocial development. Adolescence typically represents a time where young people are learning the skills and behaviors that would prepare them to be independent adults. Youth who have been repeatedly incarcerated however, often lack opportunities to reach the educational, social, psychological and emotional maturity levels that are necessary to successfully transition into adulthood (Steinberg et al. 2004). Thus earlier risk factors are further compounded by periods of

removal from home, community, and mainstream social institutions. All of these observed challenges make youth vulnerable to continuous cycles of crime and re-incarceration (Mears and Travis 2004; Spencer and Jones-Walker 2004).

### Reentry Services: Perceptions Matter

Scholars and experts in juvenile justice concur that reentry youth should receive pre-release and post-release services to help them achieve immediate and long-term stability after exiting the correctional system (Bouffard and Bergseth 2008). To that end, several reentry programs were initiated based on this framework with the goal of helping youth offenders have a smooth transition back into the community. For example, the federally funded Intensive Aftercare Program (IAP) was designed specifically to reduce recidivism rates among high-risk youth offenders. The IAP provides a structured continuum of correctional and community-based care to youth while they are preparing for release from the correctional system, as well as during the community reentry period (Altschuler and Armstrong 2002). Similarly, wraparound programs and therapeutic interventions such as Multi-Systemic Therapy (MST) are known to support youth and their families in the reentry process (Borduin 1999; Pullman et al. 2006). However, evaluations of reentry programs have indicated mixed results in regards to their ability to prevent youths' future involvement in crime, with the individually-oriented IAP showing no reductions in recidivism (Wiebush et al. 2005) and more therapeutically oriented, family-focused programs showing slightly more promise (Drake et al. 2009).

Thus although the literature overwhelmingly advocates for transitional services to help juveniles successfully reintegrate, a gap exists in terms of understanding how current reentry efforts can work more effectively. One reason for this knowledge gap may be that studies to date have focused more on outcomes of reentry services rather than youths' own perceptions of their reentry needs. Understanding youth perceptions is important, as research has shown that offender perceptions and expectations about returning home often correlate with actual reentry experiences. For example, one study of adult offenders found that individuals who hold negative self-perceptions or feelings of stigma and shame after exiting prison are more prone to isolating themselves from people, services, and their overall environments upon their return home (Rose and Clear 2003). Another study of returning adult offenders in Chicago found that those who anticipated finding employment in their neighborhoods located and sustained jobs significantly longer than those who perceived their communities as lacking in work opportunities (54% versus 21%). This study also found that offenders who perceived their neighborhoods as safe had lower recidivism levels than those who perceived their environment as unsafe (22% versus 52%) (Visher and Farrell 2005). It is notable that none of this research on reentry perceptions has included young people.

In addition to understanding youth perceptions, a few scholars have also emphasized the lack of knowledge about specific subgroups of returning youth offenders, including young women. For example, in their review of effective reentry planning, Spencer and Jones-Walker (2004) argue that characteristics such as gender and race play an integral role in youths' reentry success. These factors, in addition to self-perceptions, can influence how youth think, their daily experiences, and their ability to cope with and manage life challenges. The authors concluded that this contextual understanding of reentry is often missing from scholarly discussions as well as current service delivery systems.

## Gender and Youth Reentry

Gender is a growing concern in the juvenile justice literature, as the presence of young women in the juvenile justice system has increased substantially in the last two decades (Snyder and Sickmund 2006). For example, the number of detained<sup>1</sup> juvenile female offenders increased over 50% between 1991 and 2003, and the number of incarcerated females rose nearly 90% during this same time period (Snyder and Sickmund 2006). Female offenders currently comprise about a quarter of all juvenile arrests, and they account for 15% of all juveniles in correctional residential placements. Their rapid rate of entry into the juvenile justice system amounts to a newly significant presence in the reentry population as well.

Existing research has not specifically studied gender differences in reentry needs or experiences per se, yet it has discovered that delinquent young women face a unique set of risk factors that may *influence* their reentry needs and outcomes. For example, several studies have found that young women in the justice system experience significantly higher rates of mental health problems than their male counterparts, including depression, anxiety, behavioral disorders, and suicidal ideation (Cauffman 2008; Abram et al. 2003; Trupin et al. 2002). Past histories of sexual abuse, family problems and low self-esteem are also more common among the female offender population (Bloom et al. 2002). Moreover, nearly 10% of female offenders have at least one child, or are expecting a child in the near future (Snyder and Sickmund 2006). These gender-specific risk factors for delinquency may also influence the needs that young women have in the community reentry phase.

In response to these concerns, the movement to implement “gender specific services” in the juvenile justice system has sought to improve treatment and intervention programs for high-risk and incarcerated teenage girls (Community Research Associates 1998). Yet much less research and attention has been devoted to gender specific programming in the reentry phase of correctional care. For example, one mixed methods study that examined services for juvenile justice-involved females in California found an overall lack of quality gender-based programming, including aftercare programs designed to meet the specific needs that young females have after exiting the system (Bloom et al. 2002). Other scholars have emphasized the need for additional research and program models that take into account the unique risk factors, social, and psychological needs of young female offenders (Bloom and Covington 2001). Therefore, although the literature has begun to explore the gender-specific needs of incarcerated female youth, much remains to be discovered about the gendered aspects of youth reentry.

## Study Questions

This study explores gender differences in prior risks, perceived reentry needs, and anticipated barriers to meeting these needs among incarcerated youth who are preparing to reenter the community from a correctional placement. Specifically, this study poses the following questions:

- 1) What are the perceived needs and barriers to meeting these needs among male and female reentry youth?

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<sup>1</sup> Detained youth refers to those who remain in police custody prior to adjudication or while awaiting the disposition of their case. Incarcerated youth refers to those residing in correctional placements (Snyder and Sickmund 2006).

- 2) Do the perceived needs and barriers of reentry youth differ by gender?
- 3) Do risk factors related to reentry challenges differ by gender?

## Method

The researchers used a cross-sectional survey research design that involved face-to-face, individual structured surveys with youth preparing to exit two correctional facilities in Southern California. The study design was adequate to address the exploratory questions posed in the study. The study design was also feasible given the difficulties involved with conducting research in a large county probation system, which entailed obtaining Court approval to gain access into the facilities and coordinating recruitment and survey dates around the rigid schedules and protocols of the institutions.

## Sample

The researchers recruited a convenience sample of incarcerated youth from two juvenile probation camp facilities, one for young women, and one for young men. Each camp houses approximately 100 moderate to high-risk adjudicated youth offenders at one time for periods ranging from 3 to 12 months. Eligible youth included those who were proficient in speaking English<sup>2</sup> and who were within 60 days of scheduled release from the institutions. Youth who met these criteria were recruited during group presentations made by the researchers over a period of 4 months. Parental or legal guardian contact information was obtained for youth under age 18 who expressed an interest in the study.

Recruitment presentations were made to a total of 103 youth at the male facility.<sup>3</sup> Of the 103 young men who participated in the recruitment sessions, 35% were surveyed. Twenty-four percent of the young men declined participation, 25% did not participate due to parental consent barriers,<sup>4</sup> and the remaining 16% did not participate due to an ineligible exit date or because they were discharged from the camp before they could be surveyed. All of the 67 young women who attended recruitment sessions agreed to participate and 52% of these volunteers were surveyed. Twenty-eight percent did not participate due to parental consent barriers, and the remaining 20% did not participate because they were not eligible or available on the day of the survey. Overall, 71 youth (36 young men and 35 young women) completed the survey.

To discern the limitations of the study sample, the authors compared the demographics of the participating youth with the aggregate population of the two camps from 2007. The percentage of “Hispanic” (Latino, Mexican, or Chicano) young men in the study (78%) was similar to the aggregate 2007 population at the male facility (71%). The study sample included a slightly lower percentage of African American male youth (14% of the sample

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<sup>2</sup> This was based on the capacity of the research team. However, all of the recruited participants spoke English, and therefore no youth were excluded for this reason.

<sup>3</sup> The male and female facilities differed in how they wanted the research team to conduct the recruitment sessions. The higher number of male recruits is due to the fact that the male recruitment sessions involved all of the youth who resided at the facility ( $n \sim 100$ ), while recruitment at the female facility took place in small group sessions ( $n \sim 10$ ).

<sup>4</sup> Members of the research team were required by Court to obtain parental consent for minors under the age of 18 to participate in the study. Youth were excluded from the study if the researchers were unable to reach their parent or legal guardian by phone.

compared to 24% of the aggregate population), although this difference was not statistically significant. The study sample at the young women's facility differed significantly from the 2007 aggregate population ( $p < .01$ ). The percentage of African American youth at the female site was 36% in 2007, compared to 9% among the survey respondents. The study sample also included a higher percentage of young women who identified as "Hispanic" than the 2007 population (74% versus 57%) and a higher percentage of Caucasian youth (17% versus 6%).

The average age of youth in the study sample was 17.9 for young men and 17.4 for young women. The study sample was on average, about 1 year older than the general population of 2007 camp residents at both facilities, and this difference was statistically significant ( $p < .001$ ). This discrepancy is attributable primarily to the parental consent requirement that limited the participation of many minors who volunteered for the study.

### Protection of Human Subjects

The Office for the Protection of Research Subjects (OPRS) at the sponsoring University and the Los Angeles County Superior Court, Juvenile Division approved a detailed informed consent protocol regarding the involvement of up to 75 survey participants. All of the youth assented or consented (if they were 18 or over) to the research prior to their participation.

### Data Collection

Following the consent process, trained and gender-matched graduate student research assistants were paired with individual participants to complete the survey instrument. The research assistants verbally administered the survey to youth in private offices at the correctional sites. The survey took 30–45 minutes to complete.

### *Questionnaire*

The questionnaire was developed by a team of three graduate students, a youth advocate/lawyer, and the Principal Investigator (second author). One or more of the members of the group worked on sections of the questionnaire and then brought that section to the whole group for discussion and modifications. The Los Angeles County Department of Probation, the Los Angeles Superior Court, and the directors at the two probation camps also approved the questionnaire.

The main survey sections were: (a) demographics; (b) transition needs and barriers in the domains of education, vocation, housing, mental health, substance abuse, health, and legal services; (c) perceptions of service usefulness; and (d) overall reentry concerns and self-efficacy to avoid recidivism. These domains are identified in the literature as areas that commonly impact juvenile offenders who are returning home from correctional facilities (Altschuler and Brash 2004). The items in each section consisted primarily of categorical responses and some Likert scales. The survey instrument also included a small number of open-ended questions that allowed youth to expand upon the answers they provided in several of the above domains.

Within each major domain, we present the results according to (a) risk factors; (b) expressed or perceived reentry needs; and (c) barriers to meeting these needs. Risk factors were determined by asking youth about prior life experiences known to be associated with

juvenile delinquency and repeat incarceration, such as gang association, child welfare involvement, runaway history, and transience (Mears and Travis 2004; Snyder and Sickmund 2006; Ryan and Testa 2005). Expressed or perceived reentry needs were assessed by asking about youths' perceptions of their reentry needs (i.e., do you want a job when you exit?) or through documentation of their current circumstances (i.e., lack of job skills). Barriers were assessed by asking youth about their anticipated future barriers (i.e., how hard it is to find a job), and other potential issues that could pose reentry challenges, such as motivation to desist from crime.

The researchers constructed the majority of the questionnaire themselves. This decision was made based on the absence of an existing instrument that incorporated all of the domains of interest. One previously validated scale, the Post-Detention Likelihood to Succeed Scale (PDLSS) (Brown et al. 2003), was used to assess self-efficacy to avoid recidivism. This scale consists of nine items for youth to rate their likelihood of engaging in activities or associations that prevent or promote recidivism. Each item uses a 4-point Likert scale, ranging from "not at all likely" to "very likely" (Likert 1932). The scale also includes four additional items that ask youth to rate, on a 4-point Likert scale of "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree," their level of agreement with statements about self-efficacy in achieving pro-social goals and avoiding re-involvement with crime. The authors of the scale report a reliability coefficient of  $\alpha = .87$  (Brown et al. 2003).

Prior to survey implementation, the instrument was pilot tested with three young people (age 18) who were all recently released from a correctional placement. Following these pilot tests, several questions were modified to enhance participant comprehension.

## Data Analysis

The primary analytic tools used in this study were descriptive statistics and bivariate analyses, including chi-square tests and *t*-tests. The authors first conducted descriptive statistics to examine the distribution of youths' background characteristics, reentry needs, and expressed barriers towards meeting these needs, in the aggregate and by gender. Bivariate analyses were then used to detect gender variations within each of the domains covered in the survey. Content analysis was used to analyze all of the open-ended questions and response categories were counted and then compared across gender groups.

## Results

This section presents study findings in the background risk factors, needs, and barriers, within each of the domains assessed in the survey.

### Education

#### *Background Risk Factors*

Youth reported a high level of school transience prior to their current correctional placement, and transience levels were higher for females. Young women reported attending a higher mean number of schools at each level of their schooling, including elementary school ( $M = 2.03$  versus  $M = 1.53$ ), middle school ( $M = 2.06$  versus  $M = 1.89$ ) and high school ( $M = 3.01$  versus  $M = 2.91$ ). These differences were not

statistically significant. Nearly one-third of the sample reported having an Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) for special education (31% for men and 26% for women).

### Needs

Although the average age of the sample was 17.6, only 10% had either graduated from high school or earned their GED, and the remaining youth reported high school status. Accordingly, nearly all of the youth identified an immediate need to complete high school and/or enroll in a 2-year or 4-year college upon their reentry. As displayed in Table 1, a much higher proportion of young men reported immediate plans to attend college or vocational school (39% versus 23%). This difference is likely due to a higher mean age and higher number of high school graduates among the young men. A statistically significant relationship was detected between gender and youths' long-range (5-year) educational goals ( $p < .05$ ). Over 50% of the sample planned to pursue higher education; however 66% of the young women indicated this goal versus 41% of the young men, while a much higher percentage of young men planned to work in lieu of attending school or were unsure about their plans (44% versus 14%).

### Barriers

Despite their expressed intentions to graduate from high school and attend college, many youth reported having little to no confidence about their writing skills (53%) and math skills (72%). Moreover, among the youth still enrolled in high school ( $n = 62$ ), only 51% were certain about their number of earned credits toward graduation. Both young men and women expressed the highest degree of confidence in their reading abilities, and were least confident about their math and writing skills. Young women were significantly more confident in their writing abilities ( $p < .05$ ).

Youth were also asked in an open-ended format if they anticipated any barriers to reaching their stated educational goals. An equally high number of youth (about 50% in both groups) expressed that they did not see any problems in actualizing their educational goals. Anticipated barriers included personal motivation ( $n = 14$ ), the negative influence of friends ( $n = 4$ ), academic readiness ( $n = 4$ ), practical needs (i.e., transportation, cost) ( $n = 4$ ), other factors (i.e., having a criminal record, being too busy) ( $n = 6$ ) or uncertain ( $n = 2$ ). Bivariate analyses of these content analysis items did not reveal any significant gender differences.

**Table 1** Educational plans by gender

	Males ( $n = 36$ )	Females ( $n = 35$ )	Total sample ( $n = 71$ )
Short-range plans (%)			
Obtain GED or HS diploma	60.6	76.5	68.7
Higher education or vocational school	39.4	23.5	31.3
Long-range plans (%)*			
Higher education	41.2	65.7	53.6
Vocational or technical school	14.7	20.0	17.4
Work only or unsure about plans	44.1	14.3	29.0

\*  $p < .05$



**Table 2** Perceived vocational barriers by gender

	Males ( <i>n</i> = 36)	Females ( <i>n</i> = 35)	Total sample ( <i>n</i> = 71)
Anticipated barrier (%)			
Criminal/juvenile record	58.3	57.1	57.7
Skills or preparation	19.4	25.7	22.5
Busy schedule	25.0	42.9	33.8
Transportation	22.2	20.0	21.1
Home responsibilities	19.4	14.3	16.9
Clothing/attire	16.7	5.7	11.3
Childcare	8.3	14.3	11.3
Immigration status	11.1	8.6	9.9

## Employment

### *Background Risk Factors*

Youth reported sporadic and for some, non-traditional employment backgrounds. Only one-third of the sample had ever participated in a job training program, and only 45% had worked at least two regular, paid jobs. A significantly higher percentage of young men (78%) versus young women (43%) reported participating in illegal activities in the past to make money ( $p < .01$ ).

### *Needs*

Over 90% of the respondents expressed having an immediate need for employment upon their release. However, despite the fact that both groups earned similar wages in their past jobs, the young men had statistically significantly higher hourly wage expectations for their future employment (\$13.30 vs. \$7.80 per hour;  $p < .001$ ). In addition, 25% of the young men said they would “consider illegal activities” to make money compared to just 11% of the young women. This difference, however, was not statistically significant.

Youth who planned to work ( $n = 65$ ) were asked in an open-ended format about their immediate and long-range vocational goals, and their responses were grouped into

**Table 3** Mental health needs by gender

	Males ( <i>n</i> = 36)	Females ( <i>n</i> = 35)	Total sample ( <i>n</i> = 71)
Mental health needs (%)			
Self-identified a mental health issue	27.8	31.4	29.6
Diagnosed with a mental health issue	25.0	45.7	35.2
Agreement (self and diagnosis)	60.0	72.7	66.7
Plan to obtain counseling (%) **			
Yes	16.7	54.3	35.2
No	77.8	37.1	58.0
Unsure	5.6	8.6	7.0

\*\*  $p < .01$

previously established occupational categories.<sup>5</sup> Thirty-two percent of the young women desired immediate jobs in food services, and 32% of the young men expressed wanting to find jobs requiring physical labor. With respect to long-term career aspirations, young women commonly aspired toward health care jobs (34%), and the young men stated a desire to work in maintenance and repair fields (33%). Over 20% of the young men expressed uncertainty concerning their vocational plans, whereas only one young woman indicated a similar lack of certainty.

### *Barriers*

Youth were asked a series of yes or no questions about anticipated barriers to finding or keeping a job. As Table 2 displays, close to 60% of the youth reported that having a criminal record might hinder their job prospects. The next most commonly perceived barrier was a busy schedule, reported among 33% of the total sample. No statistically significant gender differences were found in these perceived barriers to employment.

### *Mental Health*

#### *Background Risk Factors*

A majority of the youth had participated in counseling or mental health services prior to (58%) and/or during (65%) their stay at camp. Young women more frequently reported having received a “professional mental health diagnosis in the past” (46% versus 25%); however, this difference was not statistically significant.

#### *Needs*

Table 3 summarizes youths’ professional and self-identified mental health needs. Overall, close to 30% of respondents across gender groups self-identified as having a mental health problem. Sixty-seven percent of those youth who self-identified having a mental health concern also reported that they had received a professional mental health diagnosis in the past. More of the young women agreed with their professional diagnosis than the young men (73% versus 60%), although this difference was not statistically significant (see Table 3).

#### *Barriers*

Despite the prevalence of self-identified and professional mental health diagnoses across the sample, just about one-third of all respondents stated that they planned to obtain counseling after leaving camp (see Table 3). There was a statistically significant difference in young women’s intentions to seek mental health assistance upon their reentry compared to the young men ( $p < .01$ ).

<sup>5</sup> The occupational categories used in this study were obtained from the 2000 Standard Occupational Classification System provided by the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

## Family and Housing

### *Background Risk Factors*

A high level of transience was detected across the sample, however, prior family and housing arrangements appeared to be much more unstable for the young women. Fifty-one percent of youth across the sample reported that they had moved between homes or caregivers 3 or more times in their lives. However, the young women reported moving more times on average than the young men ( $M = 4.1$  versus  $M = 3.0$ ). Further, before their camp placement, a higher percentage of female respondents had lived with relatives other than their parents (40% versus 33%), and for statistically significantly longer periods of time than the males ( $M = 81.4$  months versus  $M = 22.5$  months;  $p < .05$ ).

Seventy-three percent of the young women had run away from home in the past compared to 28% of young men, and this difference was statistically significant ( $p < .001$ ). A significantly higher percentage of young women (37% vs. 11%) also reported that they had prior involvement with the child welfare system ( $p < .01$ ), and a much higher proportion reported that they had lived in a group home placement before camp (43% versus 28%). Conversely, a significantly higher percentage of the young men had resided in another probation camp prior to their current camp placement (53% versus 11%;  $p < .001$ ).

### *Needs*

An overwhelming majority (80%) of the sample planned to live with their parent(s) upon their reentry. The remaining youth planned to live with relatives (10%), in a group home/ placement (3%), reported other arrangements (4%), or were unsure about their plans (3%). A higher percentage of young women planned to live with relatives other than their parents (14% versus 5%). No significant gender differences were identified in regards to housing plans.

### *Barriers*

Youth were asked if they had any concerns about their housing situations upon their release. Seventeen of the youth answered yes, and of this group, a significantly higher percentage of young women expressed concerns about their plans (34% versus 14%;  $p < .05$ ).

## Overall Reentry Concerns

### *Needs*

To capture youths' level of concern about their pending reentry, youth were asked to rank their level of worry about various reentry issues on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = not at all worried and 5 = very worried). Table 4 lists the mean scores on these items. Overall, the respondents reported moderate levels of worry, with education, jobs and finances, gang violence, gang involvement, and staying out of trouble constituting the most pressing concerns. As Table 4 displays, young men were significantly more concerned about family immigration issues and their own gang involvement ( $p < .05$ ). This is consistent with the finding that a significantly higher percentage of young men reported that they were gang-involved (80% versus 66%;  $p < .01$ ). Young women did not score significantly higher on any of the reentry concern items.

**Table 4** Mean scores of reentry concerns and PDLSS by gender

	Males ( <i>n</i> = 36)		Females ( <i>n</i> = 35)		Total Sample ( <i>n</i> = 71)	
	<i>M</i>	SD	<i>M</i>	SD	<i>M</i>	SD
Staying out of trouble	3.3	1.7	2.8	1.6	3.1	1.6
Completing my education	3.1	1.5	3.1	1.5	3.1	1.5
Supporting myself financially	3.0	1.4	2.7	1.4	2.9	1.4
Finding or keeping a job	3.0	1.3	2.7	1.3	2.8	1.3
My own gang involvement*	3.2	1.7	2.1	1.5	2.7	1.7
Gang violence/associations	3.0	1.7	2.3	1.4	2.6	1.6
Drugs and alcohol	2.5	1.5	2.4	1.5	2.4	1.6
Family immigration issues*	2.3	1.6	1.6	1.3	2.0	1.5
Feeling safe in my community	2.3	1.5	1.8	1.3	2.1	1.4
Getting legal assistance	2.0	1.1	1.8	1.2	1.9	1.1
Living situation	1.8	1.0	1.9	1.1	1.8	1.1
Getting transportation	1.9	1.3	1.7	1.1	1.8	1.2
Getting health care	1.8	1.0	1.6	1.1	1.7	1.1
Immigration issues for you	1.9	1.6	1.2	.81	1.6	1.3
Making new friends	1.4	1.0	1.3	.83	1.3	.94
Getting mental health care	1.1	.42	1.3	.47	1.2	.45
PDLSS Scale	1.9	.30	1.9	.41	1.9	.35

\*  $p < .05$

### Barriers

Youth were asked to rate their likelihood of using specific community services, ranked on a scale of 1 to 3 (1 = not at all likely and 3 = very likely). In the aggregate, youth anticipated being most likely to use educational, vocational, health-related, and religious services, and least likely to use counseling, legal and recreational programs (see Table 5). A statistically significantly higher percentage of the young women anticipated using health and mental health/counseling services compared to the young men ( $p < .01$ ).

The PDLSS scale assessed youths' self-reported self-efficacy to avoid recidivism. The average mean score from the PDLSS scale was  $1.9 \pm .35$  (see Table 4). These scores indicate a moderate level of self-efficacy to avoid recidivism (the available range is 1 to 4). This mean score was equivalent across gender groups and is similar to what has been reported in prior studies with youth in correctional settings (Evans et al. 2002).

### Discussion

This study explored gender differences in the prior risks, perceived needs, and anticipated barriers to meeting these needs among youth preparing to leave court-mandated correctional placements. Prior research has found that formerly incarcerated youth often need assistance in establishing skills and accessing supports that can help them achieve a healthy and productive transition to adulthood (Abrams et al. 2008). However, scant research has investigated the significance of gender in shaping youths' reentry needs or potentially, their experiences. The results of this study provide a preliminary understanding of the

**Table 5** Mean scores of youths' likelihood of service use by gender

Formal support	Males ( <i>n</i> = 36)		Females ( <i>n</i> = 35)		Total sample ( <i>n</i> = 71)	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Educational program	2.4	.56	2.6	.60	2.5	.58
Job training program	2.3	.81	2.4	.81	2.3	.81
Health clinic**	1.9	.62	2.3	.76	2.1	.73
Religious institution	2.0	.75	2.1	.68	2.0	.71
Transitional housing	2.0	.89	1.7	.83	1.8	.87
Legal aid	1.8	.74	1.5	.70	1.7	.73
Recreation center	1.8	.83	1.6	.77	1.7	.80
Counseling/mental health center**	1.4	.55	1.9	.84	1.7	.75

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

relationship between gender and youth reentry by identifying specific ways in which males and females vary in their perceptions and expectations of their transition home from the correctional system. This study also builds upon current juvenile reentry literature by highlighting how gender differences in prior risk factors may influence the overall community reintegration process.

In the area of education, the majority of youth surveyed expressed the desire to complete their high school diploma or GED upon their reentry, yet barriers such as lack of knowledge about credits and academic confidence were also present. Young women had slightly different perceptions of their educational needs and goals, as they expressed more confidence in their academic abilities and had slightly higher long-term educational aspirations. Prior research has emphasized the importance of formerly incarcerated youth receiving concrete support to help them actualize their educational goals (Mears and Travis 2004). Our study findings highlight how young men in particular may be more in need of assistance to formulate and implement their educational plans. Additional research in this area would be helpful in order to understand gender differences in reentry youths' perceptions of their educational futures, and to explore the actual barriers that young men and women face while trying to pursue higher education.

In the vocational arena, although less than half of the sample had prior job training or experience, youth across gender groups expressed a high level of certainty about their plans to seek and obtain employment after leaving camp. The young men expressed significantly higher wage expectations, and were also more likely to have plans to work right away rather than attending school. Further, they were more open to considering illegal activities in order to make money. A critical component of the youth criminal desistance process involves consciously adopting a new identity as a non-offender, and acting out that new identity in various life settings (Abrams and Aguilar 2005). Securing meaningful employment can contribute to desistance because it brings about new life routines and social ties that minimize the time one has available to spend on delinquent activities (Cernkovich and Giordano 2001; Laub and Sampson 1993). Our findings indicate that young men may have some ambivalence about finding jobs that can meet their anticipated financial needs. To address this barrier, vocational counseling and mentoring may be critical to deterring young men from returning to illegal sources of income. It may also be important for policy makers to incorporate job training and development for reentry youth in federal legislation and programs targeted towards transition-age young adults.

Conversely, possible triggers for repeat criminal activity among the young women in the sample seemed to be more related to challenges experienced in their living environment. Reports of prior family and home instability were particularly high among the young women, including having a significant runaway history and prior involvement with the child welfare system. Moreover, the young women expressed more anxiety about their pending living situations and returning to their families. Research has indicated that female delinquency is often associated with a high degree of family conflict (Cauffman 2008). The anxiety expressed by the females in this study regarding their family situations highlights a potential area where gender-specific reentry services may be appropriate. For example, young women may benefit from empirically grounded practices such as functional family therapy (FFT) and multi-systemic therapy (MST) that can help them to cope with their past and current family problems. Given the potential instability in their home environments, it may be important for policy makers and practitioners to design services for young female offenders aimed at preparing them to live on their own, such as independent living skills classes and transitional housing.

Our findings concerning mental health needs and barriers also suggest that young women may be more open to therapeutic interventions concerning reentry. A nearly equal proportion of youth across groups self-identified as having a mental health problem, yet a significantly higher percentage of females anticipated needing and using formal counseling services after leaving camp. Prior research has found that incarcerated females not only experience greater mental health challenges than males (Abram et al. 2003), but also that the emotional difficulties they face often stem from larger problems occurring within their families and personal relationships (Trupin et al. 2002). While we do not mean to negate young men's need for counseling or mental health services, it appears that young women may be more amenable to this type of intervention. The ambivalence that young men have around seeking mental health services also suggests that practitioners should consider how to frame mental health-related services in a way that invites young men's greater participation in this type of intervention.

Young men and women shared nearly the same primary reentry concerns regarding their educational and financial goals and staying out of trouble. However, they expressed only moderate levels of worry overall about their transition home and a very similar moderate level of self-efficacy to avoid recidivism. Further, despite expressed concerns about "staying out of trouble" and "gang involvement," youth did not widely anticipate using several types of formal community services, such as recreational centers that might help them with these concerns. These findings indicate that youth are clearly worried about their own transition success, yet lack confidence in their ability to actualize their goals and may be unaware of the benefits of formal services. Correctional and community service providers who are working with youth prior to their release may want to incorporate youths' specific reentry concerns when designing individualized reentry aftercare plans. Helping youth to identify the areas where they feel most vulnerable in terms of reoffending and developing strategies for dealing with these specific concerns may be a useful tool for helping to prevent recidivism among this population.

## Limitations and Conclusion

As noted previously, this survey was administered to a non-representative sample which limits its generalizability, particularly with younger offenders. The males in the sample were slightly older than the females, which may have influenced youths' perceptions of

their transitional needs and goals. This point is particularly relevant for our findings around employment, where the males expressed more of an immediate need to work and had higher expectations about their wages. Given these differences, it may be important to further inquire into gender-specific reentry services that consider age as a factor as well.

Another limitation of this study is that the original questionnaire met the needs for this study, but did not have established reliability or validity on specific items and scales. Further, the cross-sectional study design means that only anticipated barriers, rather than actually experienced barriers, were assessed. Last, the use of multiple statistical tests increases the likelihood of finding a statistically significant difference due to chance rather than an actual gender difference. For all of these reasons, the authors suggest that the data should be used to provide preliminary ideas about key ways in which reentry perceptions vary by gender as well as provide angles of inquiry for future study. We recommend that additional research begin to examine the relationship between gender, youths' perceptions, and their actual lived experiences. Researchers should also explore the differential influences of specific reentry services on reducing recidivism and improving life outcomes among young women and young men as they transition to adulthood.

Despite the limitations of this study, the findings provide modest support for the idea that reentry experiences and perceptions can vary by gender, and that these differences in perceptions are important. Wikstrom and Loeber (2000) assert that understanding how youth offenders perceive their lives, and the potential opportunities and constraints within their environments can provide important insight into their future decision-making regarding crime. In this study, we identified specific risk factors and perceptions held by each gender group which might impact their success in various reentry domains. Such findings may help service providers to better engage reentry youth, in terms of supporting youth in the areas where they feel most vulnerable and most hopeful about their reentry success. Policy makers can also benefit from this information as they continue their efforts to design reentry legislation and programs that will help young offenders successfully reintegrate back into their homes and communities and avoid recidivism into the juvenile and adult penal systems.

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