

Reintegration with Resilience: Understanding and Overcoming the Challenges of Juvenile Records

The journey toward successfully reintegrating into society after detention or incarceration presents numerous challenges for youth and young adults. One significant hurdle they face is the **lasting impact of their juvenile court records**. Each year, more than 700,000 young people, on average,^[1] are processed through juvenile courts for delinquent offenses—with the majority arrested by law enforcement—resulting in millions of youth and young adults living with a juvenile record that follows them for years, regardless of the outcomes of their cases.^{[2], [3]} Increasingly, these records are digital and are not confined to court proceedings and secure placements; juvenile records often include police reports with personal information, such as DNA, fingerprints, photographs, and more.^[4] These records can have far-reaching consequences that significantly hinder a young person’s ability to move forward after secure placement. Understanding and addressing these impacts are crucial for reentry programs that aim to support young people in their successful reintegration.

Understanding the Impacts of Juvenile Records

Juvenile court records can trigger a series of **collateral consequences**, impacting various aspects of life beyond detention or incarceration.^[5] These consequences can significantly limit opportunities in several areas critical for successful reintegration, including the following:

- **Education.** Eligibility for certain educational opportunities, such as financial aid or specific certification programs, may be restricted due to juvenile records. Such consequences can limit young people’s abilities to pursue higher education and potentially affect their future career prospects.
- **Employment.** Many employers use background checks as part of the hiring process, and juvenile records can disqualify individuals from certain jobs or dissuade employers from hiring them, even for offenses unrelated to the position.
- **Housing.** Finding safe and stable housing can be difficult for individuals with a juvenile record because many landlords conduct background checks and may reject individuals with a juvenile record. This can lead to housing insecurity and instability.

Beyond these practical limitations, juvenile records can perpetuate negative labeling and **stigma**, affecting how individuals are perceived by society and impacting their self-esteem and motivation.^{[6], [7]} This situation can create a sense of hopelessness in young people and hinder their efforts to move forward positively. Because many young people constantly face societal judgment or are denied opportunities due to a juvenile record, they may have feelings of isolation, shame, and a belief that they are forever defined by past mistakes. Such feelings can significantly hinder motivation to engage in positive change and can contribute to a cycle of negativity.

Furthermore, the difficulties in pursuing education and obtaining employment and housing due to the collateral consequences of juvenile records can increase the risk of **recidivism**.^{[8], [9]} As individuals struggle to find a path to successful reintegration, they may resort to negative coping mechanisms or fall back into old patterns of behavior that may be delinquent or criminal, which highlights the crucial role of reentry programs in equipping youth and young adults with the tools and support they need to overcome these challenges and achieve positive reentry outcomes.

What Reentry Programs Need to Know and Do

Given the challenges young people face in overcoming the barriers imposed by juvenile court records, it is imperative for reentry programs to equip themselves with a thorough understanding of the potential consequences of juvenile records and the available options for addressing them. This understanding allows reentry programs to effectively support the young people they serve in navigating these challenges and reentry programs can take several crucial steps to help youth address juvenile records and improve reintegration outcomes.

Education and Awareness

It is important for young people to understand the potential consequences of juvenile records. To help them become aware of the severity of the situation, reentry programs can host or connect young people to **informational workshops or seminars**. These sessions should educate youth and young adults about (a) the different types of juvenile records and their varying impacts, (b) the eligibility criteria and legal processes involved in record sealing or expungement, and (c) the importance of maintaining a clean record moving forward. Beyond these informational sessions, reentry programs can connect young people to **one-on-one sessions with legal professionals or advocates** who can help young people assess their specific cases and explore their options for record sealing or expungement. This personalized approach ensures that young people receive accurate and relevant information tailored to their individual circumstances.

Supporting Record Sealing and Expungement

Reentry programs can play a crucial role in supporting young people in seeking to seal or expunge their juvenile records. The process of record sealing or expungement can be intricate and bewildering, but, with the right guidance, the process becomes more manageable. Supportive reentry programs can assist with (a) helping young people **gather necessary documentation and complete required forms**; (b) connecting them with **legal aid services or pro bono attorneys** who can offer legal representation and guidance at an affordable cost; and (c) **advocating for them in court proceedings**, if necessary. Additionally, the **costs associated with record sealing and expungement can be a significant barrier** for many young people. In addition to working with and connecting young people with legal aid and pro bono services, reentry programs can explore other options to help young people overcome this hurdle, such as **fundraising initiatives or grants** specifically designated for this purpose and connecting young people with **scholarships or financial assistance programs**.

Building Life Skills and Resilience

Beyond legal matters, reentry programs can focus on equipping the youth and young people they serve with essential life skills and other “soft skills” that can build resilience and help them navigate the challenges of a juvenile record. Some key supports that programs can provide include the following:

- **Job search skills training** to equip young people with the necessary skills to navigate the job market, including résumé writing, interview preparation, and networking techniques. This training can help young people overcome potential hiring biases related to their juvenile records and secure gainful employment.

- **Financial literacy workshops** that teach young people about responsible budgeting, managing finances, and building credit. Financial literacy can empower young people to overcome housing challenges and achieve financial stability, reducing the risk of recidivism.
- **Mentorship programs** that connect young people with peers and/or caring adults who can offer guidance, support, and encouragement as they navigate the reintegration process. Mentors can be positive role models and help young people build self-esteem and confidence despite the challenges associated with their juvenile records.

By understanding the significant and multifaceted impact of juvenile records and offering comprehensive support, reentry programs can assist young people with addressing the lingering impacts of their juvenile records, which not only improves their chances of pursuing education, finding employment, and securing housing, but also fosters a sense of urgency and hope, ultimately leading to successful reintegration and a brighter future.

Resources to Support This Work

[Expunging Juvenile Records: Misconceptions, Collateral Consequences, and Emerging Practices](#)

Andrea R. Coleman, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2020

This Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention bulletin identifies and discusses common misconceptions about the expungement of juvenile delinquency records and provides information about the collateral consequences of having a juvenile record, as well as federal, state, and local emerging practices about this issue.

[Reducing Structural Barriers to School and Work for People with Juvenile Records](#)

The Council of State Governments Justice Center, 2021

This [study](#) details an analysis of policies and practices in 12 states conducted to better understand the education and employment barriers that people with juvenile records face and to develop recommendations and resources that policymakers in all states can use to guide statutory reforms. The corresponding [policy solutions toolkit](#) was developed to support the adoption of these policy solutions and provides practical resources for policymakers, including sample legislative language and best practice examples from states across the country.

[Automatic Expungement of Juvenile Records](#)

National Conference of State Legislatures, 2024

All states have procedures that allow juveniles to petition to either seal or expunge their records in certain cases. However, these procedures can be confusing and cumbersome. This resource provides an inventory of state legislation on automatic sealing or expungement of juvenile records, meaning the records are sealed or expunged without any action on the part of the youth.

[Clean Slate Clearinghouse](#)

National Reentry Resource Center, 2023

The Clean Slate Clearinghouse offers a database of the state policies that provide for the sealing, expungement, or other clearance mechanisms for juvenile court records and resources focused on records clearance.

Endnotes

- ^[1] Sickmund, M., Slinky, A., & Kang, W. (2022). *Easy access to juvenile court statistics: 1985–2020* (EZAJCS). National Center for Juvenile Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. <https://www.ojjdp.gov/ojstatbb/ezaics/>
- ^[2] Puzzanchera, C., Hockenberry, S., & Sickmund, M. (2022). *Youth and the juvenile justice system: 2022 national report*. National Center for Juvenile Justice. <https://ojjdp.ojp.gov/library/publications/youth-and-juvenile-justice-system-2022-national-report>
- ^[3] Juvenile Law Center. (n.d.). *Issues: Records*. <https://jlc.org/issues/records>
- ^[4] Holmes, M. (2021). *Juvenile records: Misconceptions, stigma, and principles of juvenile record protection*. Coalition for Juvenile Justice. <https://www.juvjustice.org/juvenile-records-stigma-misconceptions>
- ^[5] National Conference of State Legislatures. (2020). *Collateral consequences of juvenile court involvement*. <https://www.ncsl.org/civil-and-criminal-justice/juvenile-justice-report-series>
- ^[6] National Juvenile Justice Network. (2016). *Confidentiality of youth in the juvenile justice system: Policy platform*. <https://www.njjn.org/our-work/confidentiality-of-youth-in-the-juvenile-justice-system--policy-platform>
- ^[7] Holmes, M. (2021). *Juvenile records: Misconceptions, stigma, and principles of juvenile record protection*. Coalition for Juvenile Justice. <https://www.juvjustice.org/juvenile-records-stigma-misconceptions>
- ^[8] Robertson, A. A., Fang, Z., Weiland, D., Joe, G., Gardner, S., Dembo, R., McReynolds, L., Dickson, M., Pankow, J., Dennis, M., & Elkington, K. (2020). Recidivism among justice-involved youth: Findings from JJ-TRIALS. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 47(9), 1059–1078. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9285988/>
- ^[9] Seigle, E., Walsh, N., & Weber, J. (2014). *Core principles for reducing recidivism and improving other outcomes for youth in the juvenile justice system*. Council of State Governments Justice Center. <https://csgjusticecenter.org/publications/reducing-juvenile-recidivism/>



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