

Young Adult Justice-Involved Persons: Practice Guidelines for Probation Staff¹

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YOUNG ADULTS, TYPICALLY ages 18–25, are continuing to develop and mature—most are still learning how to independently manage adult responsibilities such as working, paying rent and bills, and caring for children. Their ongoing biological, psychological, and social development is a contributing factor to their overrepresentation in community supervision. Despite making up less than 10 percent of the national population, young adults aged 18–24 account for 28 percent of all arrests and represent 26 percent of the probation population (Justice Policy Institute, 2016). Young adults are markedly different from their mature adult peers, so it is not surprising that young adults on community supervision are more likely to experience revocation than older adults (Cuddy et al., 2018). Additionally, more than half of the young adults in community supervision programs are people of color (Justice Policy Institute, 2016). Thus, supervision practices should be informed by the unique needs of this special population. Not only can effective supervision practices help a young adult set a positive course for life, but they can also improve equity by effectively supporting the many young adults of color on supervision.

What Do Probation Staff Need to Know about Young Adults?

Young adulthood, commonly considered ages 18–25, can be viewed as a period with specific developmental tasks and goals. The ongoing development of young adults can directly contribute to their participation in community supervision, since young adulthood is a period when individuals are very likely to engage in risky and sometimes criminal behaviors. The age-graded crime curve, which is widely accepted among criminologists, indicates that individuals are most likely to engage in criminal behaviors in late adolescence and early adulthood (Agnew, 2003). Similarly, psychologists have identified early adulthood as a period of peak engagement in risky behaviors, such as reckless driving, binge drinking, and fighting (Duell et al., 2018). Taken together, it is not surprising that the risk for involvement in the criminal legal system also peaks in early adulthood (Piquero et al., 2002). Thus, it is highly likely that supervision staff will work with young adults.

At the same time, consequences for offending suddenly become more severe, since young adults transition from the purview of the juvenile system to that of the adult legal system. Involvement in the legal system has the potential to derail a young adult's progress toward independence and productive citizenship. This disruption can have lifetime financial, social, behavioral, and civic implications for individuals and the greater society. As such, knowledge of how young adults continue their biological, psychological, and social development through this period of life can help supervision staff to assist with their

development and increase their success on supervision.

Biological basis: The young adult brain differs from the mature adult brain both in terms of development and activation. First, two important aspects of the brain—the prefrontal cortex and limbic system—are still developing (Bernard et al., 2020). The prefrontal cortex controls decision-making and impulse control, while the limbic system influences emotional regulation (Bernard et al., 2020). Second, brain activation differs. Around puberty, there are changes in the brain that reward sensation seeking, which peaks around age 19 (Steinberg et al., 2018). Changes in dopamine receptors (which are associated with the brain's reward circuitry) occur around puberty, resulting in increased sensation-seeking (Steinberg, 2008). At the same time, it takes some time for self-regulation to develop, which consistently increases through early adulthood (Steinberg et al., 2018). Additionally, young adults also experience more rewarding brain activity in the presence of peers compared to adults (Chein et al., 2011; Steinberg, 2008). Thus, supervision staff should recognize that a young adult's brain has not fully developed, with potentially negative consequences for the young adult's behaviors and therefore success on supervision.

Psychological basis: The ongoing brain development will impact the individual's behavior in three ways. First, young adults are more likely to make risky or impulsive decisions based on emotion than older adults due to a lack of maturity in their neural pathways (Cohen & Casey, 2014). Additionally, young

¹ This work was funded by Arnold Ventures. The views and opinions expressed here are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the position of the funding agency. We would like to acknowledge the contributions of Dr. Faye Taxman, CJ Appleton, and Ben Mackey from George Mason University.

adults assess risk differently from older adults (Bernard et al., 2020). Due to the young adult brain's reward circuitry, the rewards of positive behavior are experienced more strongly biologically, so the benefits of risky behavior will be weighed more heavily than among adults with mature brains (Steinberg, 2008). At the same time, self-regulation continues to develop through young adulthood (Steinberg et al., 2018). Finally, young adults are more susceptible to negative influences and external peer pressure (Bernard et al., 2020). Thus, young adults are more likely to choose to engage in risky behaviors, even after a careful assessment of the situation. In other words, the young adult may make mistakes (e.g., driving drunk) that can be understood as indicators of normative development.

Social basis: The transition to adulthood period is pivotal when individuals engage in the process of transitioning into taking responsibility for themselves—in no other life stage do people make so many transitions across multiple domains in a short period, including finishing school, finding work, and starting their own families (Lee, 2014; Masten et al., 2004; Schulenberg et al., 2004; Tanner, 2006). From a developmental perspective, *the goal is for young adults to take responsibility for themselves by committing to adult roles*, such as choosing a career and deciding whether to start a family. To accomplish this goal, *the developmental tasks are the acquisition of human and identity capital*. *Human capital* refers to educational attainment and work experiences—the resources that will help the young adult secure and keep a job (i.e., earn a living). The term *identity capital* refers to both tangible and intangible resources that people use to strategically invest in their identity, or development of “who one is” (Côté, 2002). Both are important to the developmental period.

In terms of human capital, requirements for entry-level jobs—those that come with both benefits and opportunities for career growth—often require college or graduate degrees and/or years of work experience. For individuals with a high school diploma or less, and/or limited work experience, job opportunities tend to be limited to wage employment, with few benefits and opportunities for career growth. Wage employment also tends to pay less. Thus, human capital is required to earn a sufficient living. Overall, it takes longer for an individual to acquire the necessary human capital to enable an individual to earn a living that is sufficient to provide for the individual and/or a family.

Identity capital has become more important since the contemporary transition to adulthood is less structured than in previous generations (Côté, 2000). There used to be a clear and singular default pathway into adulthood. For example, family formation was expected to be linear: date, marry, cohabit, and parent. In terms of work, the expectation was to finish school (high school or college) and start working. Today, these transitions no longer follow a strict ordering. Some young adults may have children before possibly (or never) marrying; others may cohabit, marry, and never have children. Similarly, some young adults may not finish high school, work for a bit, complete their GED, start a vocational school, and work some more. The individual nature of the transition to adulthood is an accepted norm, which means that individuals must make numerous decisions about who they are and how they want to engage with the world. And, for young adults of ethnic/racial/religious/sexual minority identities, these decisions may be more complicated—especially if the young adult must navigate multiple competing norms (e.g., a woman who chooses to prioritize motherhood (family cultural norms) over schooling that would enable her to provide for her child (larger societal norms)).

Thus, it is helpful if supervision staff keep in mind that young adults on their caseload may be in the process of learning how to take responsibility for themselves and those that depend on them. It may take some time and discussion to help the young adult learn how to take responsibility for mistakes concerning community supervision. It is important to be aware of how their involvement in supervision may hinder or facilitate their acquisition of human and identity capital, the developmental tasks that will help them achieve their developmental goal of being independent and responsible adults.

What Do Probation Staff Need to Know about Young Adults in the Criminal Legal System?

Young adults in the criminal legal system tend to be a subset of young adults who lack the resources and opportunities to achieve the developmental tasks of this period. Young adulthood can be a transition period full of possibilities for those with the support of families and colleges (e.g., semi-independent living in a dorm with a meal plan) (Brock, 2010; Schoeni & Ross, 2005; Waithaka, 2014). However, this transition period can pose

challenges for young adults without these supports, especially for young adults who cannot delay transitioning into adult roles while they acquire the human and identity capital necessary to take on those roles successfully. As Comfort (2012) wrote, the fact that young “adulthood is construed for the better-off as a time to indulge in privilege and promise while impoverished young adults are expected to learn from and even thrive through suffering can alert us to further layers of inequality and disadvantage that merit exploration” (p. 319). Many young adults in the criminal legal system have experiences that indicate their families’ lack of resources. For example, many young adults in the criminal legal system report family backgrounds that include homelessness or involvement in the foster care system (Morton et al., 2017). Additionally, foster youth aging out of care report disproportionately high rates of involvement in the criminal legal system (Courtney et al., 2010). Thus, providing support to help young adults transition successfully into adult roles, such as facilitating their educational attainment, can be the difference between whether the young adult can become a productive adult or will repeatedly return to the criminal legal system.

There is a need for more services targeting young adults (Fendrich & LeBel, 2022; Stanley, 2016). In general, young adults have high service needs, such as reporting the highest rates of substance misuse (Davis et al., 2017; Stanley, 2016). Specifically, young adults in the criminal legal system may not have received needed services such as substance misuse services or mental health services: compared to their peers in the general population, these young adults report higher rates of alcohol and illegal substance misuse (Pirius, 2019) and a higher prevalence of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs, such as childhood abuse or neglect, parental separation), trauma, and mental health problems (Pirius, 2019; Van Duin et al., 2020). These unmet service needs can directly contribute to the young adult’s involvement in the criminal legal system, such as through ongoing substance misuse. Additionally, unmet service needs may contribute indirectly to the young adult’s involvement in the criminal legal system. For example, the presence of ACEs in an individual’s personal history decreases the ability to self-regulate emotions and diminishes cognitive flexibility (Dube et al., 2009; Kalia & Knauff, 2020). Already dealing with the lack of maturity that is normative during this developmental period, these young adults

may have a host of unique service needs ranging from educational and vocational supports to life skills development to trauma-informed mental health care. *Probation officers must link young adults to resources as part of their individualized supervision plan.*

Supervision Outcomes

Some research has found that young adults tend to have poorer outcomes on probation than their mature adult peers. A review in Texas found that only 18 percent of young adults completed their full two-year probation term versus 41 percent of adults in their mid-twenties, with most cases being terminated due to revocation (Cuddy et al., 2018). Violating the terms of their probation is the most common reason young adults are confined in residential custody (Sickmund et al., 2021). Missing appointments or not following through with mandated programs could be cause for violation of an individual's probation, but they are not inherently criminal behaviors. These are normative behaviors for young adults who are going through ongoing psychosocial maturation and, if handled properly, can help the young adult learn how to make sound decisions. For example, mandating attendance in a 12-step program may be an effective rehabilitative strategy. However, it is important to be aware that young adults may struggle to meet such mandates—they may struggle to find transportation or manage their schedules, and thus may require some additional coaching to help them manage their obligations. It is realistic to expect that they will struggle with keeping appointments and thus, should be given some leeway to make age-appropriate mistakes.

Fines and Fees

Probation programs in 48 states require payment of substantial fees by the client, with the average client owing anywhere between \$10-\$150 in supervision fees each month and other fixed fees ranging from \$30 and \$600 throughout their sentence (Brett et al., 2020). Many programs also mandate payment for regular drug testing, electronic monitoring systems, specialized programs (like anger management or substance abuse treatment), and more (Brett et al., 2020). Non-payment can result in the extension of their sentence, or even revocation and incarceration (Cuddy et al., 2018). And, although fee waivers due to low income are available in most states, they are extremely hard to obtain and can be a huge burden for individuals to prove (Brett et al.,

2020). Thus, fines and fees are often extremely burdensome for young adults and may negatively impact their ability to achieve the goals of young adulthood.

Many of the young adults involved in the criminal legal system have lower levels of educational attainment and therefore struggle to find consistent, well-paying jobs (The Council of State Government Justice Center, 2015). If a young person is struggling to find and maintain employment, paying for housing and other bills is already going to be challenging. Adding these prohibitively expensive probation fees can entrap young people in an endless cycle of debts to the courts with the threat of incarceration (Albin-Lackey, 2014), while precluding opportunities to develop the human capital that their peers are developing through college, graduate school, or internships. Additionally, these financial sanctions effectively turn supervision officers into bill collectors, which can run counter to their role as a change agent by introducing conflict into the officer-client relationship. Thus, it is important to call attention to the importance of reducing this financial burden for all people on probation, particularly for young adults who may lack the social, educational, and vocational support to pay these fees due to their developmental stage.

What Evidence-based Treatments Have Been Identified for Young Adults in the Criminal Legal System?

There are some studies examining community supervision practices. One study piloted supervision practices with young adults and compared results to a comparable group of their peers. The pilot project formed a specialized unit dedicated to young adults (defined as ages 15-25) and used a combination of four promising practices: Effective Practices in Community Supervision (EPICS) case management, knowledge of brain development science, Trauma-Informed Care (TIC), and an Equity and Empowerment Lens (E & E Lens) (Bernard et al., 2020). Community supervision officers were trained to employ practices consistent with all four promising practices to supervise young adults, and the study showed trends toward a positive impact on recidivism, although a longer follow-up period may be necessary to show clearer results (Bernard et al., 2020). In another study, the emphasis was on using incentives to help young adults commit to goals related to employment and education; the incentives contributed to

reduced recidivism and technical violations (Clark et al., 2022).

Two other studies have found preliminary evidence for the effectiveness of community-based programs. Youth Advocates Programs (n.d.) is one such program that promotes a model that identifies a person's individualized needs to develop wraparound community and family support. Roca (n.d.), another community-based program, also works to identify the unique needs of young adult men and links them with critical educational, vocational, and therapeutic services in their community. Roca pairs the individual with a youth worker who builds a relationship with and creates a safe space for the individual to begin skill-building programs. Both programs have seen substantial decreases in rates of recidivism and increases in employment and vocational attainment among their program participants (Roca, n.d.; Youth Advocates Programs, n.d.).

Positive psychology interventions (PPIs) for mental health. There is evidence for the effectiveness of PPIs for mental health issues among young adults. The goals of PPIs are to use the young adult's character strengths to improve cognition, behavior, and overall well-being. These treatment methods include engaging in activities such as using cognitive behavioral therapy techniques to alter thinking patterns to be more positive, practicing gratitude, or encouraging hope. In their comprehensive meta-analysis of these interventions, Sin and Lyubomirsky (2009) found that PPIs were effective in increasing psychological well-being and treating depressive symptoms; however, they noted that the effectiveness of PPIs increased with age, meaning that they may be less useful for young adults.

There has been limited research on the effectiveness of PPIs on those involved in the criminal legal system, particularly focusing on the 18-25 year age range. One study found that incarcerated adults who were introduced to PPIs in an 8-week intensive program in a Washington state correctional facility self-reported increased levels of gratitude, life satisfaction, and hope (Huynh et al., 2015). But the impact of this type of programming on outcomes for individuals on probation has not yet been explored.

Despite this, PPIs are inherently strengths-based approaches that can be employed to encourage the positive development of identity capital. Ciarrochi et al. (2022) argue that PPIs do not need to be exclusively administered by professionals trained in therapeutic psychology. Probation staff working

with young adults in the criminal legal system could employ PPI approaches by taking a strengths-based approach to the young adult by focusing on any successes—even little ones—to build confidence and self-efficacy. Working to identify the unique needs and strengths of each individual and tailoring a program to their individual goals may not only improve outcomes but could also encourage self-sustainability and growth.

Interventions for substance use and abuse. Brief alcohol intervention is effective with young adults. Tanner-Smith & Lipsey (2015) conducted a meta-analysis to examine the effect of brief alcohol intervention on young adults, taking into account characteristics both of the young adult and the intervention. Brief alcohol intervention was “defined broadly . . . as an intervention aimed at motivating behavior change in a relatively circumscribed time (one to five sessions)” (p. 1). They found positive effects of brief alcohol intervention on reducing alcohol consumption and problems from alcohol use. They found no differences in characteristics of the young adult (i.e., effective across age, race, and gender) and intervention components, and they found comparable effects for various other strategies: cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), motivational enhancement/motivational interviewing (MET), expectancy challenge, feedback/information, and psycho-educational therapy (PET), although the combination of CBT and MET did not yield significant effects. Additionally, they found similar effects across delivery sites (primary care/health center, school/university, self-administered), except for in the emergency room. Yet, more studies should specifically explore young adults involved in the criminal legal system.

There is some evidence for the effectiveness of prevention and treatment interventions for substance use and abuse among young adults. Prevention interventions are provided to individuals exhibiting risky substance use, while treatment interventions are provided for individuals with substance use disorders. Davis et al. (2017) conducted a meta-analysis to identify the effectiveness of both prevention and treatment interventions on substance use outcomes (including alcohol use, illicit drug use, and problem consequences of alcohol and other drug use). Their study focused on young adults ages 18–25 who received services in a non-college setting. The study found that there are positive effects of CBT, motivational interviewing (MI), and miscellaneous

(pharmacological or other interventions without a clear manual or guiding principle) prevention and treatment interventions. The positive effect was comparable across the three types of interventions. However, personalized feedback interventions, which provide feedback based on the individual’s drinking behaviors, are effective among college students but may be less effective among non-college young adults. Prevention and treatment interventions appear to have a stronger effect among college students.

Overall, there is emerging evidence about models of supervision that take into account brain development, trauma, issues of diversity, and practices that support the positive development of young adults by connecting individuals to resources and services in their communities. Additionally, there is some evidence to support PPIs for mental health and brief interventions for substance misuse. Yet, there are not many studies specifically focused on young adults in the criminal legal system, since studies on emerging adults tend to focus on college students, including research on substance use interventions (Davis et al., 2017). Future studies should specifically test PPIs for mental health and brief interventions for substance use among young adults on community supervision.

How Can Probation Staff Be Effective Change Agents for Young Adults on Community Supervision?

At a potentially pivotal moment in the lives of young adults, the criminal legal system can provide the support that may help the young adult pursue such productive roles in society as parent, employee, coach or mentor, etc. As the brain continues to develop through young adulthood, individuals can grow and change. Thus, the role of a change agent (that is, officers who work to change a client’s behavior for the better, rather than to punish or just monitor them) is especially important. Working with young adults can be viewed as a pivotal opportunity: probation staff can help set the young adult up for a successful adulthood by applying knowledge of this developmental period to their work with young adults.

First, *recognize mistakes (e.g., missing appointments or classes, taking risks such as using an illicit substance) that are normative young adult behaviors and reframe them as an opportunity for growth—be prepared to coach the young adult through their mistakes.* Engaging in risky behavior and testing

boundaries is how many young adults learn and grow (Mizel & Abrams, 2018). Yet, within the context of community supervision, these normative behaviors take on a different meaning—they are considered noncompliance which requires action by the supervision officer. In fact, normative young adult behavior, such as drinking alcohol with friends who are 21 and older, can be a violation for a young adult on community supervision, even if those friends could be classified as “prosocial.” Supervision practices should acknowledge and respond to two normative mistakes a young adult can make: poor executive functioning or poor decision-making. Either way, noncompliance with supervision requirements should be handled with an awareness of the unique needs of young adults.

Noncompliance with supervision requirements. Probation staff should take the time to understand a young adult’s noncompliance. Struggling to manage numerous supervision conditions on top of their burgeoning adult responsibilities is normative behavior given that their prefrontal cortex, which is also responsible for executive functioning, continues to develop. For example, the young adult may be having trouble tracking multiple responsibilities; the person may be struggling with time management or may not realize the necessity of communicating in advance of a missed meeting. Thus, noncompliance may indicate developmentally appropriate challenges and provide opportunities to help the young adult develop those skills. Harshly penalizing these young adults for normative struggles may be counterproductive. Rather, coaching an individual through a missed appointment may be more helpful initially—such as suggesting that they set an alarm when it is time to leave so they can make an appointment on time. When repeated noncompliance requires the need to impose consequences upon young adults, probation staff should employ a restorative lens rather than a punitive one. Restorative approaches to accountability for young adults mean that consequences should be immediate, causal (clearly linked to the action, and transparent), proportional to both the action itself and the harm that it has caused to others, applied consistently, performed using a community-centered context, and focused on respecting the individual (Sered, 2016).

In addition to mistakes associated with managing multiple responsibilities, young adults will make mistakes by taking risks such as using an illicit substance. Young adults can

accurately assess risk, but they value the benefits of the risk differently from mature adults. Young adults will weigh the rewards from risky behavior more heavily than older adults, since they will biologically experience a stronger reward for a positive outcome. And, the presence of peers may create an even stronger biological reward for the risky behavior due to the reward circuitry in their developing brains. A consequence such as sending the young adult to jail may not have the desired effect. Sending the young adult to jail may be based on the assumption that the young adult does not fully understand the consequences of the actions. But the young adult may have accurately assessed the probability that they would *go to jail* but have given it less weight than a mature adult would while more heavily weighting the benefits of *being high with friends*. In fact, sanctions and reprimands can actually *increase* substance use and recidivism (Mowen et al., 2018). And, sending the young adult to jail may derail the person's future by disrupting education or work experiences while marking the person as a "criminal."

Incentives. Given the young adult brain, incentives may be especially effective, since young adults experience rewards more strongly than mature adults. Incentives can include a range of rewards, including monetary, praise, and reduction of supervision requirements (e.g., reduced time on supervision or frequency of drug testing). Among young adults, incentives have been found to help individuals commit to education and employment goals while reducing recidivism and technical violations (Clark et al., 2022). For incentives to be effective, they should be provided early in the relationship and immediately in response to a positive behavior (Sloas et al., 2019). Additionally, praise can be more effective than reducing supervision requirements (Mowen et al., 2018), so even under-resourced probation staff can provide effective incentives (i.e., praise). Thus, providing an incentive can reinforce a "good" decision, since the young adult brain's reward circuitry will experience rewards more strongly, thereby adjusting their accounting of the risks and rewards of a given decision.

Second, *recognize that the young adult may have unmet needs for services that contributed to involvement in the criminal legal system, so it may be helpful to connect the young adult to needed services*. Many young adults in the criminal legal system have high rates of service needs, such as substance misuse and mental health issues, that appear to be unmet. Some of these needs, such as transportation

or childcare difficulties, may impact their ability to meet their supervision conditions. Providing young adults with an open line of communication and building trust so that they can be honest about their needs is critical and can cultivate their ability to be responsible for themselves. Building trust also involves connecting young adults to resources that can address their needs, such as providing bus passes or connecting them to affordable child care. Similarly, attention should be paid to youth who may transition from the juvenile legal system. Practices such as frequency of contact may be different between the adult and juvenile legal systems, and communication between systems may be difficult (Price, 2020). This may result in young adults "falling through the cracks." Thus, recognizing and addressing the service needs of young adults may help set them up for success.

Third, *facilitating the young adult's developmental tasks of acquiring human capital so they can earn a living wage and identity capital so they can take responsibility for themselves and their decisions and set up a young adult for a productive life*. Community supervision staff can provide the structure, support, and accountability that may help a young adult acquire human capital through school attendance or participation in a vocational program, which can help the young adult transition successfully into adult roles. Thus, strongly encouraging—but not necessarily mandating—educational attainment or work experience may make a huge difference for young adults.

While addressing identity capital may be a bit more challenging, developing identity capital is accomplished in settings where young adults can make mistakes and learn from those mistakes with minimal long-term consequences. Young adults in the criminal legal system may have already accepted their identity as "delinquent" or "criminal," which poses a direct challenge to the ability to develop identity capital that will help the young adult succeed in adult roles. Thus, it might be helpful to encourage the development of "redemption scripts" for young adults on probation (Maruna, 2001). As Maruna (2001) describes it, "redemption is a process of freeing one's 'real me' from external constraints" (p. 95). In this sense, the "redemption script" can be understood as the development of positive identity capital. Maruna (2001) found that for many individuals, prison can be a place to shed their problematic past and write a new "redemption script" by finally feeling as

though they have control over the narratives of their own lives. Thus, one potential strategy for community supervision that may divert individuals from becoming incarcerated may involve helping young adults to develop identity capital, specifically by helping the young adult write their "redemption script."

Probation practices can be adapted to serve as an opportunity for young people to discover their "real" selves and (re)write their future in a safe environment. First, probation staff can act as the outside source that empowers the young adult to find their "real" self and take control of their narrative (Maruna, 2001). If a probation officer is seen by young adults as supportive of their redemption rather than someone who is imposing strict rules upon them and/or trying to catch them committing violations, probation staff can be the catalyst for a young adult's self-change. Villeneuve et al. (2021) found that probation officers can best assist in changing an individual's self-identity in community supervision by providing a safe and encouraging environment. And, Mowen et al. (2018) speculated that praise was a more effective incentive than reduced supervision conditions in their study because praise clearly communicated a positive assessment of the client to the client. In both cases, supervision staff worked with the young adult to set and achieve meaningful goals and provide consistent encouragement and positive feedback (Villeneuve et al., 2021). Thus, probation staff can serve as change agents for young adults by empowering them to set and achieve goals, thereby helping them take control of their narrative of success.

Probation staff can also support a young adult's redemption script by providing them with opportunities to engage with the community in ways that are meaningful to the young adult. Maruna (2001) found that desisting individuals expressed a deep desire for longer lasting accomplishments for themselves. Many individuals reported finding pleasure in creative pursuits or becoming a "professional ex"—someone who assumes a professional role of helping others who have been in their situation through mentoring or counseling (Maruna, 2001). Having criminal legal experiences can be stigmatizing, so helping young adults rewrite this identity by emphasizing how their legal experiences can help someone else can effectively overwrite the stigmatized identity. Mentorship programs have been shown to increase formerly convicted mentors' self-esteem and the development of interpersonal and professional

skills (Kavanagh & Borrill, 2013). Therefore, providing young adults on probation with opportunities to give back by supporting others through community engagement may help them succeed in their own supervision program.

Young adults continue their biological, psychological, and social development. Young adults will need help with managing multiple responsibilities and decision-making, may have unmet service needs, and are in the process of establishing themselves as responsible adults. Yet, young adulthood is an exciting period of possibility, and poses an incredible opportunity for probation staff to make a significant impact on their lives.

Example of Interaction

Here is an example of an interaction between a probation officer and a young adult on the officer's caseload. The young adult has missed an appointment. The probation officer applies knowledge of this developmental period and uses positive psychology interventions (PPI) to engage the young adult in changing their narrative and developing a "redemption script".

Probation Officer (PO): Hey! It's nice to see you again. So, I haven't heard from you in about a week. I was starting to get a little worried about you. What's been going on?

Young Adult (YA): Well, I had things going on that I had to take care of.

PO: What sort of things did you have to take care of?

YA: That's my business.

PO: That's true, it is your business. But I want us to talk about how we can better communicate with each other so that if you have to miss a meeting, I can readjust my schedule to accommodate it. Do you know what I mean?

YA: I guess.

PO: I want to work together to figure out what's best for you. Because I know that sometimes these rules can be pretty hard to follow, right?

YA: *laughs* You have no idea.

PO: Yeah. Did you know that there's a lot of research out there that shows that, since you're only twenty years old, your brain is still developing?

YA: I didn't know that.

PO: It's true. So it's actually pretty normal for people your age to mess around and have a hard time understanding how to react to stressful situations, and that may sometimes cause you to make mistakes. But here's the thing: mistakes here can be a bigger deal than

they are for other people your age. I know you want to succeed in this. I know you want to stay in your community with your family and your friends. And you deserve that. I know you are capable of succeeding because you have a lot of things going for you.

YA: You think so?

PO: Absolutely I do. You are a hard worker, a good parent for your kids, you care about your family—and you're strong despite having gone through a lot of setbacks. This is just another one of those setbacks.

YA: Sometimes I feel like I have no support and the weight of the world is on my shoulders. And like I'll always be labeled like I'm some criminal. I want to make something of myself. I want to help other kids so they don't end up in the spot I'm in.

PO: It absolutely can be. You are not just some "criminal." I'm here to support you in your success. I think kids would really benefit from hearing about your life story. I want you to try and focus on how you can be a mentor to others because I think that will help you with your program.

YA: That means a lot. I think that would give me that drive that I need. And I am sorry that I missed the meeting. I wasn't able to get anyone to cover my shift, and I need to work so I can pay for this program. It feels like a vicious cycle.

PO: I understand. How about we come up with a plan to ensure that we can communicate more effectively moving forward that works for *you* to make sure this doesn't happen again?

YA: That would be great, thank you.

Key Terms

Young Adulthood: Ages 18–25, a critical transition period when individuals engage in the process of separating from their birth families and begin to take responsibility for themselves by committing to adult roles and responsibilities.

Human Capital: Educational attainment and work experiences—the resources that will help the young adult secure and keep a job (i.e., earn a living).

Identity Capital: Both tangible and intangible resources that people use to strategically invest in their identity, or development of "who one is."

Positive Psychology Interventions (PPIs): Goals are to use the young adult's character strengths to improve cognition, behavior, and overall well-being.

Key Takeaways

1. The brain continues to develop through young adulthood, so this is an exciting opportunity for probation staff to be an effective change agent.
2. Young adulthood is a transition period where youth are highly likely to engage in high-risk behavior.
3. Young adults continue their biological (brain), psychological, and social development, so young adults may require coaching to be able to hold to meetings and commitments, and to take overall responsibility for themselves.
4. Young adult brains experience rewards more strongly than mature adult brains, so the use of incentives may be especially effective for encouraging positive change.
5. There is a lack of research and knowledge about services and interventions for young adults involved in the criminal legal system.

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