



Breaking the Cycle: A Pilot Program for the Release of Minors from Detention and Imprisonment A Formative Evaluation Study

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Abstract

Background

In February 2020, a pilot program was launched with the aim of changing the model of working with minors in detention and imprisonment in Israel. The program is implemented based on a unique professional model and its goal is to help young offenders to break the cycle of crime and to enable them to live normative lives as adults. The program is led by the Government Coordination Unit for Child and Youth Rights (formerly, the Inter-Ministerial Unit for the Prevention of Juvenile Delinquency) at the Ministry of Justice and implemented in collaboration with many partners: the Ministry of Justice – the Attorney General's Office, the Public Defender's Office, the Legal Aid Department, the Office of Legal Counsel and Legislative Affairs, and the Courts Administration; the Ministry of Public Security – the Israel Prison Service; the Ministry of Education – the Division for Children and Youth at Risk; and the Ministry of Welfare and Social Affairs – the Youth Probation Service, the Youth Protection Authority, and the Prisoner Rehabilitation Authority.

Goals

In February 2021, the Ministry of Justice commissioned the Myers-JDC-Brookdale Institute to conduct a formative evaluation study of the pilot program for the release of minors from detention and imprisonment. The study examined the following issues: the implementation of the program and the identification of factors that contributed to its implementation as well as factors that called for improvement; the collaboration between the parties involved in the program; the factors that promoted the program success and the factors that hindered success; the changes in work practices in the course of the program; the importance of human capital for the program, with the focus on the role of the program manager.

Method

A formative evaluation model suited to the evaluation of the first stages of the program was chosen together with the commissioning entity. The study data were collected through 35 semi-structured in-depth interviews and three observations, conducted from May 2021 to March 2022. The study population included the program leaders on behalf of the Government Coordination Unit for Child and Youth Rights at the Ministry of Justice and professionals from all the bodies involved in the program, both at headquarters level and in the field. Interviews were also conducted with two graduates of the program who had served time at the Ofek prison as minors.

Key Findings

1. Several actions were taken prior to the launching of the program, which contributed to its success. For instance, mapping the organizational environment, formulating commonly agreed goals, working transparently with the partners to the program, and working simultaneously at both the individual and general levels.
2. The six principles that constitute the conceptual and practical framework of the program are,
 - Creating a therapeutic-medical-educational continuity – for instance, by establishing data coordination and communication channels between the care providing entities, and by developing structured stages of work in the program.
 - Establishing collaboration between all the professional parties involved in caring for minor prisoners – for instance, by conducting shared training and guidance sessions, and by maintaining organizational identity.
 - Exercising flexibility and providing fast and efficient solutions in response to changing needs in the field – for instance, by maintaining operational flexibility, and by adapting the work practices and discussions in the relevant committees to the nature of the program.
 - Selecting and training suitable personnel for work in the program – for instance, appointing a permanent chairperson for the early-release committee (reentry court) as part of the program, and hiring professionals who identify with the spirit of the program and its values.
 - Strengthening the motivation of minor inmates to get early parole – for instance, by developing a therapeutic intervention program for each youth starting in the first days of detention, and by adopting a respectful attitude toward the youths throughout the process.
 - Taking a broad perspective of the intervention program developed for each youth – for instance, by providing close personal support for the youths vis-à-vis the probation committees, and by updating the involved professionals and maintaining communication between them in the various stages of the process.
3. Difficulties and challenges involved in the program. For instance, excessive workload burdening the professionals taking part in the program, gaps between the therapeutic intervention jargon and the legal language, and the absence of established communication channels with the social services departments in the local authorities and with the educational institutions.

Recommendations for Further Development of the Program

The interviewees suggested various recommendations for further development of the program, among them, allocation of a dedicated budget for the program, topping the current budgets of all partners to the program, conducting psychoeducational evaluations of all the youths participating in the program, engaging Arabic speaking professionals and professionals speaking other languages in all the therapeutic intervention programs, and initiating legislative amendments to improve the rehabilitation programs and expand the options for rehabilitation.