

Exploring young people's experiences of transition from youth detention in the ACT

This project was conducted by Tim Moore, Vicky Saunders, Morag McArthur (2009) for the ACT Department of Disability, Housing and Community Services (now HCSD).

Background

Young people leaving detention face significant challenges: disruption of relationships, limited supports, and difficulties reintegrating into their communities. Understanding the lived experience of transition is necessary for designing more effective, responsive systems.

Research questions

- How do young people experience the transition from detention back to the community?
- What are the challenges that limit the success of their reintegration?

What we found

1. Transitions are fragile spaces

Young people described release from detention as a vulnerable point: reduced supports, competing demands and little preparation for living in the community.

2. Relationships matter—but are unstable

Trusted adult relationships were rare, inconsistent, or disrupted by staff turnover and service fragmentation. Without stable connections, reintegration faltered.

3. Holistic needs were often unmet

Young people's mental health, education, housing and relational needs frequently went unaddressed in a coordinated way, undermining their ability to build positive lives.

4. Service systems weren't seamless

Young people and their carers experienced fragmented, siloed services. Lack of continuity between detention and community supports created gaps and risk.

5. Hope and identity are key levers

Where young people believed in their futures, had opportunities to contribute and received recognition, their resilience and outcomes improved.

Who we engaged

A cohort of **11 young people** who were on committal orders at the Quamby Youth Detention Centre in the ACT.

Through approximately 18 months of engagement, interviews were conducted in-custody and post-release.

Family members, carers and service staff nominated by participants also contributed via interview or focus group.

Implications for practice and policy

Embed **transition planning early**, with young people, their families and carers fully involved.

Prioritise **relational continuity**—one trusted adult, one consistent case plan.

Provide **wrap-around supports** that address mental health, education, housing and connection.

Build **integrated service pathways** that flow from detention into community—not just release.

Foster **hope, agency and identity** by recognising young people's potential and enabling their meaningful participation.

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“I think [my workers are] pretty important because if I didn't have them I would've, I don't reckon I'd be going as well as I am at the moment.”

