

# The 21st Century Juvenile Justice Work Force

By Meghan Howe, Elyse Clawson and John Larivee

Corrections is facing a work force crisis, as are many other fields in the public sector. Changing demographics are leading to a dwindling number of motivated, qualified workers entering and remaining in the corrections field. This reduction of potential employees is coupled with the challenges that agencies face in a dynamic field, where the number of clients is increasing and policy and practice are continuously evolving. The field is facing a serious question of how to keep up.

The American Correctional Association is meeting this challenge with its Building a Correctional Workforce for the 21st Century project. This includes both adult and juvenile corrections, and has begun to identify the work force needs and concerns regarding front-line workers in both arenas. This begs the question: Is it appropriate to consider juvenile and adult correctional workers as one work force? While both groups fulfill a critical public safety role, juvenile justice is additionally charged with a child welfare role. The potential of the work force to nurture the positive growth and development of children, or conversely to place children in harm's way, adds another dimension to the consequences of a work force crisis in juvenile justice. Thus, it is worthwhile to consider this work force as a separate entity.

## Juvenile Justice Workers

There is little specific information available on the juvenile justice work force. Aggregate data on the number of workers in the field, their education and experience levels, average salary, and demographic information are generally best-guess estimates. This is the case for several reasons. Juvenile justice often is not considered a field on its own, which discourages the collection and tracking of data on the work force. The Bureau of Labor Statistics<sup>1</sup> does not maintain a job classification for juvenile detention workers or juvenile probation officers, so no specific trend or forecasting data are available at the national level. In many cases, individual agencies maintain work force data for

their own population, but no comprehensive efforts have been undertaken to compile and analyze this information.

However, three initiatives have shed some light on the state of the juvenile justice work force. The first is ACA's 21st century work force effort, which is aimed at developing a strategic plan for the correctional work force and draws predominantly from data on the adult correctional work force. The second is the Human Services Workforce Initiative, funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation (of which the authors are grantees) and administered through Cornerstones for Kids. This initiative is attempting to improve outcomes for children and families by improving the quality of the human services work force, including juvenile justice. The third initiative relies on data compiled by the National Center on Juvenile Justice, such as state profiles that include some training, caseload and salary information for probation officers. In addition, some of these data are confounded with information from adult correctional departments.

Together, these initiatives describe several characteristics of the work force, as well as several areas for further research:

- According to the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the juvenile justice work force comprises approximately 300,000 workers earning an average of \$30,000 per year.<sup>2</sup>
- Several studies<sup>3</sup> indicate that workers remain in the field because they enjoy working with children and families, and they want to help children achieve meaningful outcomes.
- Workers leave the field because of long hours, insufficient support from supervisors, low pay, lack of a career ladder and high stress.<sup>4</sup>
- Workers perceive that they are managing more high-need children than in the past, such as those with substance abuse or mental health disorders, and that they are not trained to manage this population.<sup>5</sup>

- Working conditions vary widely between agencies, but many workers feel that they work in unsafe conditions.<sup>6</sup>

Though this information is not representative, it paints a picture of many employees who are dedicated to the needs of children but often frustrated with stressful working conditions and a lack of recognition and opportunities for advancement.

The Human Services Workforce Initiative also sought to identify the competencies (i.e., the knowledge, skills and attributes) that make an effective juvenile justice worker. Both front-line staff and managers listed similar competencies, including good communication skills, patience, creativity, respect, motivation, compassion and commitment to youths. However, many workers also agreed that these attributes were not necessarily reflected in job descriptions and that agencies do not always know how to hire for those competencies.

## Role Duality in Juvenile Justice

Juvenile justice workers fulfill a dual role: a public safety and accountability role, which involves the management of youths' behavior, and a rehabilitation and youth development role, which involves mentoring and coaching youths in pro-social skill development. This duality is a source of frustration as well as opportunity among the juvenile justice workers.

A source of frustration is that the field is not well defined for potential and current employees. This results in confusion for workers who are not well prepared for their role<sup>7</sup> and difficulty in recruiting workers who are appropriately educated and trained. Many juvenile justice positions now require a bachelor's degree. However, degrees in the social sciences or social work do not prepare candidates for the public safety aspect of the job, and programs in criminal justice do not address the youth development role of the juvenile justice worker. In both cases, it is possible to complete a degree without ever taking a course specifically related to juvenile justice; such courses may not even be offered for interested students. As a result, students may leave college without considering juvenile justice as an option, without an understanding of what the work entails or with the idea that juvenile justice is simply a stepping stone to a career in adult corrections.

For entry-level employees, role duality can be especially frustrating because the job is not what they expected, because they see inconsistency within the organization or because they do not see their colleagues as supportive. For example, corrections-minded individuals may not perceive their treatment-minded colleagues as supportive in maintaining safety and holding youths accountable for their behavior, while treatment-minded workers may feel that corrections-minded workers treat children too much like adult offenders. These are generalities, of course, and most employees fall on a continuum rather than at the extremes of these perceptions. However, the attempt to blend these two mindsets is a source of frustration for juvenile justice workers.

The opportunity of this duality lies in the fact that juvenile justice falls into the realm of corrections and human services work. Juvenile justice can take advantage of work force development efforts in both arenas. In addition, potential juvenile justice workers can be drawn from the applicant pool for both sectors, thereby increasing the likelihood of recruiting candidates with required competencies. If social work and criminal justice students are given opportunities for informational sessions, coursework and internships in juvenile justice, they may find that the mix of competencies required in juvenile justice is an excellent match to their skills.

## Unique Concerns

Several issues in juvenile justice differ from adult corrections and human services, and require attention. The results of a 2003 ACA work force study<sup>8</sup> emphasize the need to market juvenile justice as a viable career option and to work with educational institutions to ensure that new workers are prepared for the challenges of the job.

According to the survey, 24 percent of respondents from juvenile correctional facilities reported that recruitment was "extremely difficult," compared with only 10 percent of those from adult institutions.

In addition, juvenile facilities were more likely to cite a "shortage of applicants" (42 percent juvenile vs. 33 percent adult), "too few applicants that meet job requirements" (24 percent vs. 13 percent) and "young people lack knowledge of profession" (21 percent vs. 12 percent).

Data from a Brookings Institution survey<sup>9</sup> of students pursuing Bachelor of Arts and social work degrees at top colleges support ACA's findings:

- When asked whether they had considered working in juvenile justice, 86 percent answered "not too seriously" or "not seriously at all."
- When asked how informed they were about career opportunities in juvenile justice, 73 percent were "not too informed" or "not informed at all."

These data point to a marketing crisis in juvenile justice. To increase the potential applicant pool, the field must engage in a public relations campaign to improve understanding of what juvenile justice work entails. This lack of public awareness could intensify the work force crisis if other fields start to vigorously recruit available workers. Many juvenile justice employees report that they came to juvenile justice as a stepping stone to other jobs and discovered that they loved the work. If in-demand workers no longer need the juvenile justice stepping stone, juvenile justice may be bypassed as a career option.

## Where to Go From Here

As the demand for correctional and human service workers grows, juvenile justice agencies will face competition from both fronts in hiring and retaining a qualified work force. Juvenile justice agencies, in partnership with their human services and adult corrections counterparts,

can take several steps to ameliorate a juvenile justice work force crisis.

**Collect more data on the work force.** A dearth of information is available on work force demographics, working conditions and, most notably, the pathways by which individuals enter and leave the field. Without more primary research, the unique needs of the juvenile justice work force cannot be completely understood.

**Tailor promising practices to the needs of the juvenile justice work force.** Juvenile justice work is unique among both corrections and human services professions, combining elements of youth development, child welfare, education and public safety. Many work-force-related promising practices put forth in corrections and human services are relevant to juvenile justice but must be tailored to attract the right people for the job. This should include raising the profile of juvenile justice as a career option.

**Address adult and juvenile justice work force in tandem.** Unless jurisdictions' work force issues are addressed simultaneously in the adult and juvenile systems, an improvement in one will likely be at the expense of the other. If both adult and juvenile corrections increase their desirability as employers, then employees can self-select the workplace that best suits them, and agencies can more carefully match employees to their population.

**Increase public perception of juvenile justice as a desirable career choice.** Qualified individuals are not going to enter juvenile justice without an awareness of what the work entails and the opportunity to access appropriate education and training. Unless the field increases the visibility of the unique aspects of juvenile justice work and facilitates opportunities for education and training, other more visible fields will lure away qualified applicants.

**Increase the diversity of the work force.** Though juvenile justice is increasingly employing more women, individuals of color and bilingual/bicultural staff, much more must be done to align staff demographics with client demographics. Targeted recruitment of a more diverse work force serves the dual purpose of increasing the available applicant pool while reflecting the diversity of the community and the client population.

**Engage in a comprehensive work force planning process.** Work force planning is a systematic approach to assessing the condition of the current work force, as well as an agency's future needs, and then creating a plan to address gaps. Many government agencies require a work force planning approach, and private and nonprofit agencies are beginning to follow suit. Many resources are available to assist agencies with this process.<sup>10</sup> Unless the "big picture" of current and future work force needs is considered, agencies will be continually playing catch-up with their work force and likely falling short of meeting the needs of youths and the community.

A reduction in the number of working-age Americans is inevitable, but this reduction does not need to translate into a work force crisis. Agencies must plan ahead in order to identify their staffing needs and to create a plan for recruiting and retaining employees with the desired competencies. Juvenile justice settings require employees with a unique blend of correctional and human services mindsets; therefore, identifying these workers may require a

specialized approach. Juvenile justice agencies must get on board with the work force planning efforts under way in human services and corrections. Otherwise, the field will have its potential work force lured away. However, juvenile justice also must differentiate itself, so that its opportunities and needs are not subsumed under those of other organizations.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Bureau of Labor Statistics. 2006. *Occupational outlook handbook 2006-2007*. Available at [www.bls.gov/oco](http://www.bls.gov/oco).

<sup>2</sup> Annie E. Casey Foundation. 2003. *The unsolved challenge of system reform: The condition of the frontline human services work force*. Annie E. Casey Foundation: Baltimore.

<sup>3</sup> Annie E. Casey Foundation. 2003.

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<sup>4</sup> National Council on Crime and Delinquency. 2005b. *Job turnover in child welfare and juvenile justice: The voices of former frontline workers*. Houston: Cornerstones for Kids.

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<sup>5</sup> Howe, M. et al. 2006.

National Council on Crime and Delinquency. 2005a.

<sup>6</sup> National Council on Crime and Delinquency. 2005b.

Light, P.C. 2003.

<sup>7</sup> Liou, K.T. 1995. Role stress and job stress among detention care workers. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 22(4):425-436.

<sup>8</sup> Workforce Associates. 2004. *A 21st century work force for America's correctional profession*. Indianapolis: Workforce Associates.

<sup>9</sup> Light, P.C. 2003.

<sup>10</sup> Barlow, E.D. and J.G. Fogg. 2004. Building a strategic work force plan for the correctional organization. *Corrections Today*, 66(5):110-115.

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