

Improving Emerging Adults' Safety and Well-Being

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This tool describes how practitioners can advance public safety goals by connecting emerging adults (ages 18 to 26) with community-based resources and helping them avoid harmful involvement with the criminal justice system. Creating and investing in community-based continua of care and opportunity can help young adults build and strengthen: (1) [relationships and support networks](#), (2) [health and well-being](#), and (3) [financial stability and security](#).

WHY IS EMERGING ADULTHOOD A CRITICAL STAGE OF BOTH RISK AND OPPORTUNITY?

Emerging adults (people between [18 and 26 years old](#)) are developmentally distinct from adolescents and adults. Emerging adulthood involves change and risk-taking, and a lack of opportunity and support during this stage can have lifelong consequences. Structural inequality poses additional barriers for some people transitioning to adulthood, potentially increasing the likelihood of justice involvement and its associated collateral consequences. In addition, emerging adulthood involves growth and opportunity as young adults continue to establish their identities, gain independence, and connect with their peers and communities in new ways.

Compared with adolescents, emerging adults are more likely to

- **live independently** outside their parent or guardian's home,
- exit compulsory education and **enter postsecondary education and/or work**,
- develop **new peer networks**,
- face **higher rates of anxiety** and other mental health issues,
- become **financially independent**, and
- become parents.

Compared with adults, emerging adults are more likely to

- **take risks** and act impulsively,
- **lack a continuum of care** to support their transition to adult responsibilities,
- experience **unstable housing**,
- have **lower or less stable incomes**,
- have more **unstable, temporary employment**, and
- engage in **short-term romantic relationships**.

HOW CAN COMMUNITY SERVICES SUPPORT SAFE NEIGHBORHOODS AND HELP EMERGING ADULTS SUCCEED?

Often, the criminal justice system is the first response to problems that are symptoms of systemic issues like poverty, lack of access to mental and behavioral health care, and complex trauma. But justice involvement can negatively affect emerging adults and derail their transition to stable and healthy adulthood.

In contrast, community supports can help young adults navigate this transition and set a trajectory for success. Practitioners and service providers can use community-based opportunities and person-centered strategies to help young adults transition to adulthood and avoid system contact by

- supporting prevention efforts,
- offering diversion opportunities in tandem with social service provision, and
- reducing the long-term negative impacts of justice involvement.

THREE KEY FOCUS AREAS FOR PROMOTING SUCCESSFUL TRANSITIONS TO ADULTHOOD

Health and Well-Being

Emerging adulthood often involves change, stress, and risk-taking. A continuum of health care—especially preventative care—is important for encouraging healthy sexuality, preventing substance abuse, and cultivating healthy habits.

Emerging adults should have access to a continuum of health care including insurance, mental health services, and preventative care to help them navigate this transitional period.

Relationships and Support Networks

Relationships can be formative during emerging adulthood. Though healthy, stable relationships provide important support, some emerging adults may benefit from help with learning how to handle relationship conflict maturely.

For healthy development, emerging adults may benefit from support with building and strengthening positive relationships with peers, parents, caregivers, mentors, partners, and children. Community engagement can also have a positive impact.

Financial Stability and Security

Emerging adults navigate growing economic independence and financial responsibility. Although they are more likely than other adults to be financially precarious and have unstable housing and employment, success during this stage can set the course for long-term economic security.

To achieve economic independence, emerging adults may need guidance as they consider educational options, pursue long-term employment, learn financial planning, and seek stable housing.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR JUSTICE PRACTITIONERS AND SERVICE PROVIDERS

- Prioritize targeted approaches for emerging adults and the people who support them.
- Improve access to community-based supports and remove barriers for young people who are justice involved.
- Limit the use of the criminal justice system for emerging adults and focus resources on building out a community-based continuum of care and opportunity.
- When emerging adults do experience justice system contact, policies and processes should reflect emerging adulthood's unique challenges and opportunities.
- Create opportunities for emerging adults to inform policies and practices that affect them.

Helping young people transition to healthy adulthood keeps communities strong and safe.

For additional information and examples of programs addressing the needs of emerging adults across the US, see this tool's companion guide, [A Guide to Community Strategies for Improving Emerging Adults' Safety and Well-Being](#).