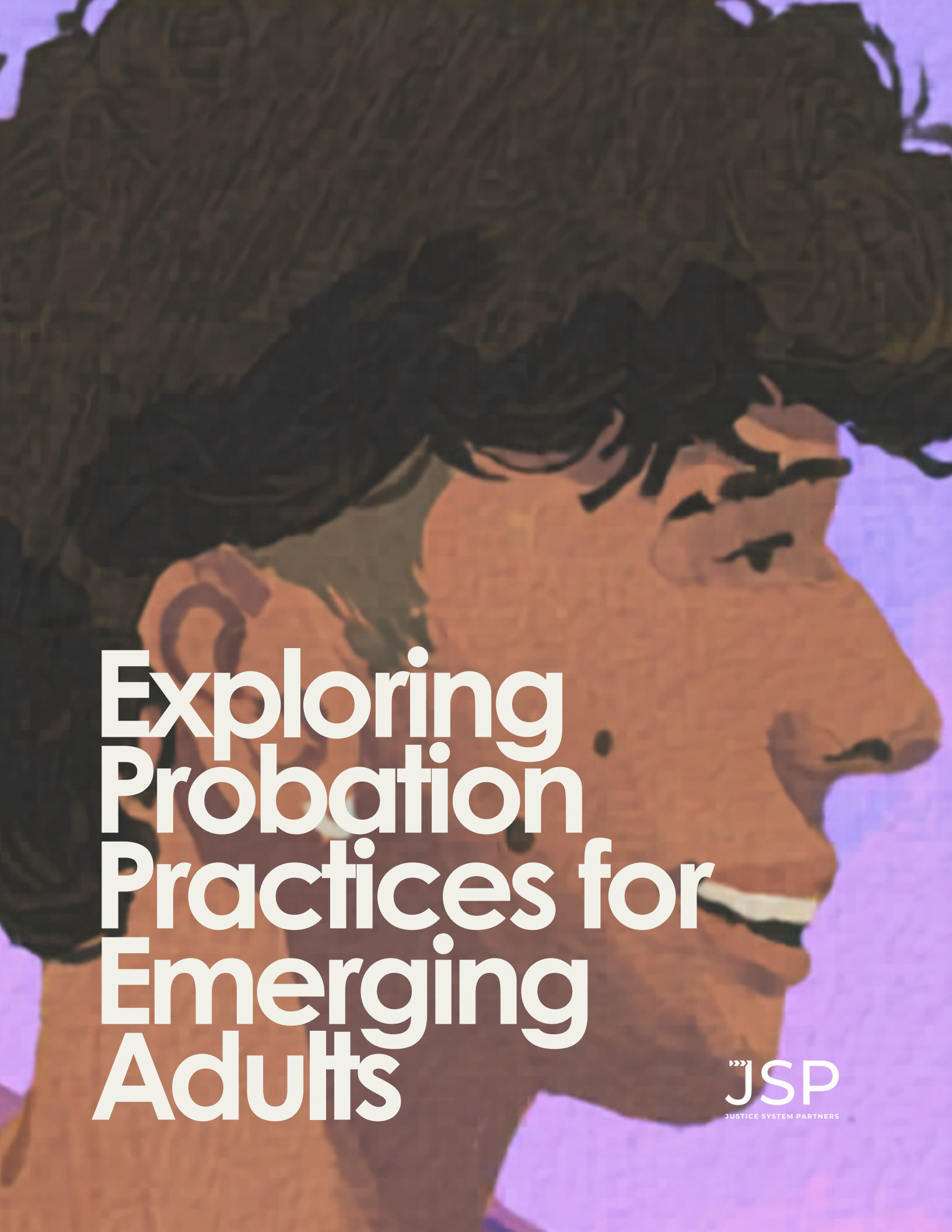




Exploring Probation Practices for Emerging Adults

» JSP
JUSTICE SYSTEM PARTNERS

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**Better Systems.
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We also thank the probation departments and practitioners who completed the survey. Their willingness to share how they are defining, designing, and implementing emerging adult approaches made this scan possible and helps illuminate what is beginning to take shape across the field.

Finally, we acknowledge the individuals at the heart of this work. We recognize the leaders who have invested in specialized approaches because they understand that emerging adults require something different. We recognize the supervisors and staff who navigate the complexities of this work every day and whose experiences are reflected in the data presented here. And most importantly, we acknowledge the many emerging adults who continue to move through systems that are not yet designed to meet their needs. It is their lived experience—their resilience, their challenges, and their potential—that reminds us why this work matters and why doing better is both necessary and possible.

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Introduction

Emerging adults—individuals who are in their late teens through their mid-twenties—represent a unique population.

Though legally considered adults, they differ from older, more established adults, both socially and developmentally. Socially, they are less likely to hold stable jobs, marry, or become parents when compared to their older peers.¹ Developmentally, their brains are still maturing, with full development typically not occurring until around age 25.^{2,3}

Emerging adults make up approximately one in four people under probation supervision nationally, despite representing less than 10 percent of the general population,^{4,5} making them disproportionately overrepresented in the criminal legal system.^{6,7}

Traditional probation models, which emphasize surveillance and standard conditions, often fall short for these 18–25 year olds by failing to acknowledge their developmental realities.^{8,9} Their heightened impulsivity, susceptibility to peer influence, difficulty with long-term planning, and lack of life stability or material or other resources make compliance with rigid probation conditions especially challenging.^{10, 11} Additionally, they face distinct challenges including unstable housing, limited employment opportunities, and difficulty navigating adult responsibilities while still experiencing ongoing identity development and developing executive functioning skills, further complicating compliance to probation rules.^{12,13}

Standard adult probation departments typically emphasize punitive responses to breaking probation

conditions rather than supportive interventions. This can escalate minor infractions into probation revocations, returning these vulnerable adults to jail.¹⁴ In fact, emerging adults placed under probation supervision for felony offenses are more likely than older adults to have their probation revoked and/or cycle between jail detention and the community.¹⁵ In particular, emerging adults of color experience the highest rates of revocation, reflecting systemic racial inequities that compound developmental vulnerabilities.^{16,17}



Emerging Adults make up one in four people under probation supervision.

Despite there being over 2,000 probation agencies across the United States, only a limited number have implemented specialized responses—court, correctional units, or probation programs—tailored to the needs of emerging adults.

These specialized units may train officers in trauma-informed care, moral decision-making, impulse control, and the neuroscience of late adolescent development. By incorporating developmentally attuned training, probation agencies can strike a better balance between accountability and support for the emerging adults they supervise, and importantly have a sizable impact on 18- to 25-year-olds returning to jail.

While innovative, little is known about the design, scope, and implementation of these specialized

units. Therefore, there is a need to better understand the core components that define emerging adult probation units, including what common practices are used across units, which practices are most effective, and what goals drive these specialized efforts.

This report will delve into some of these characteristics from a national scan of probation agencies and their practices.



Understanding the Case for Emerging Adult Probation

Emerging adults—young people aged 18–25—navigate a distinct developmental stage marked by ongoing cognitive growth, identity formation, and transitions in education, employment, and relationships. This period creates both opportunity and vulnerability, particularly when intersecting with the criminal legal system.

Although emerging adults comprise less than 10 percent of the U.S. population, they account for roughly 26 percent of individuals under probation supervision, underscoring their disproportionate representation in the system nationwide.^{18, 19}

Despite this overrepresentation, probation systems are not designed with their developmental needs in mind. Most emerging adults are supervised through standard adult probation models that emphasize compliance, surveillance, and enforcement. Across the nation, adult probation agencies often assign caseloads exceeding recommended standards and limit their role to monitoring compliance to conditions and imposing supervision fees.^{20,21}

Common probation requirements—such as strict curfews, travel restrictions, and mandatory drug testing—compound the developmental and social challenges emerging adults face.^{22,23} At the same time, emerging adults experience increased impulsivity and susceptibility to peer influence alongside instability in housing and employment.^{24,25} These factors make it difficult to meet rigid supervision expectations and increase the likelihood of technical violations.

When these violations occur, they often lead to revocation and reincarceration, disrupting emerging adults' development and creating long-term barriers to employment, housing, and stability during reentry.^{26,27,28} Rather than supporting successful transitions into adulthood, standard probation practices can reinforce instability during a critical life stage.

Evidence from state systems further illustrates this gap. In Texas, adult community supervision officers carry caseloads averaging over 100 individuals.²⁹ Statewide, only 18 percent of 17–21 year-olds and 41 percent of 22–25 year-olds successfully complete felony probation within two years, compared to a 60 percent completion rate for older adults.^{31,32}

In contrast, juvenile systems—while not designed for emerging adults—operate with lower caseloads and emphasize rehabilitative approaches, including trauma-informed and family-centered services.^{33,34} These approaches have been associated with lower recidivism rates among youth who complete supervision compared to those who are incarcerated.^{35,36}

Why Traditional Probation Models Fall Short

Neither adult nor juvenile justice systems adequately serve the developmental needs of emerging adults. Adult probation models often operate as “one-size-fits-all” systems built on expectations designed for fully mature adults. They prioritize surveillance and compliance through fixed reporting schedules, mandatory conditions, and financial penalties rather than individualized, developmentally responsive support.³⁷

These models assume a level of stability that many emerging adults do not have. Consistent employment, reliable transportation, and stable housing—conditions often required to meet supervision expectations—are not yet established for many individuals in this age group.³⁹ At the same time, ongoing development of executive functioning—including impulse control, planning, and decision-making—makes adhering to complex requirements more difficult.^{40,41}

These developmental challenges intersect with structural inequities. Emerging adults of color often face additional trauma and systemic barriers that heighten the difficulty of navigating supervision successfully.⁴²

Juvenile systems, while more rehabilitative, are also not designed for this population. Most exclude individuals over age 18 despite continued developmental needs.^{43,44} Even when accessible, their reliance on family-centered and school-based interventions may not align with emerging adults’ increasing independence.^{45,46}

Together, these limitations leave emerging adults in a structural gap—subject to adult expectations without developmentally appropriate support.

How Justice Involvement Disrupts Maturation

For most individuals, arrests decline naturally with age, peaking in late adolescence and early adulthood before decreasing over time.^{47,48,49} However, involvement in the criminal legal system can interrupt this trajectory. Rather than supporting desistance, system involvement can reinforce instability and delay maturation.

The conditions of supervision, combined with collateral consequences such as arrest and conviction records, restrict access to employment, education, and housing at a critical stage of life.^{52,53} Incarceration disrupts social networks and family relationships that support

healthy development, while the stress of navigating legal obligations can impair emotional regulation and cognitive growth.^{54,55}

Collateral consequences—including barriers to housing, financial aid, employment, licensing, and healthcare—persist long after probation supervision ends.^{56,57} These impacts are particularly harmful for emerging adults who have experienced trauma, trapping individuals in cycles of instability rather than supporting recovery and growth.^{58,59}





The Case for a Developmental Approach

This gap is rooted in what researchers describe as the “maturity gap.”^{60,61} Neuroscience shows that executive functioning—including planning, impulse control, and assessing risks—continues developing into the mid-twenties.^{62,63} New sociological trends suggest many of the milestones traditionally associated with adulthood—such as stable employment, marriage, and independent living—are happening later in life, extending the transition into adulthood.^{65,66}

As a result, emerging adults are expected to navigate complex systems and responsibilities without the neurological maturity or life stability required to do so successfully.⁶⁷ They must manage probation conditions while balancing unstable employment, temporary housing, and evolving social relationships—creating multiple points of potential failure.

Developmentally informed probation models seek to address this mismatch by balancing accountability with support and aligning supervision with the realities of this life stage.

Promising Models in Practice

Across the country, jurisdictions are beginning to translate these principles into practice. While approaches vary, many share common elements: specialized officer training, reduced caseloads, individualized planning, and connections to age-appropriate community services.

Programs in Texas, California, Georgia, Massachusetts, and New York illustrate this range of approaches. Harris County's Young Adult Caseload assigns emerging adults to trained officers and incorporates individualized planning.^{68,69} San Francisco's

Transitional Age Youth Unit integrates incentives and milestone-based progress and has reported a 73% completion rate.^{70,71,72,73} Atlanta's diversion model connects emerging adults to services at the point of arrest, reducing future system involvement.^{74,75}

Massachusetts and New York further demonstrate the value of both court-based and community-based models. Programs such as CHOICE (MA) and NeON (NYC) integrate supervision with employment, education, and wraparound supports, while community-based models like Roca show significant reductions in recidivism and increases in employment outcomes.^{76, 77, 78, 79, 80, 81, 82, 83, 84, 85, 86, 87}



Although these approaches differ in structure, they share a common goal: supporting emerging adults in building stability and progressing toward long-term success.

A Framework for Effective Practice

Research and pilot programs have identified key elements of effective probation models for emerging adults. The Columbia Justice Lab's Emerging Adult Justice (EAJ) Framework provides criteria for understanding what makes specialized probation effective for this population.⁸⁸ It outlines a theory of change that links logic models to hiring, training, and program design alongside capped caseloads (i.e., 15 individuals or fewer), goal-based planning, strengths-centered interventions, and equitable, non-punitive responses to noncompliance.⁸⁹

The EAJ Framework proposes a three-level model for systemic change:

- Level 1: Support individual well-being by promoting safety, belonging, identity, competency, and contribution.
- Level 2: Transform practice via the CARES (Cohesive, Accessible, Responsive, Equitable, Safe) principles.
- Level 3: Realign policies and funding to eliminate harmful statutes and expand supportive ones, as well as direct resources toward community-centered programs.

While the EAJ Framework was developed through studying select programs, independently developed specialized approaches for emerging adults exist in various forms across the country.⁹⁰ Altogether, these design blueprints offer a roadmap for shifting probation systems from compliance-driven models to developmentally informed practice.

The Need for Systematic Evaluation

Despite promising pilots and conceptual frameworks, systematic evaluation of specialized emerging adult probation practices remains limited. Definitions of “specialized” vary, outcome data are inconsistently reported, and no standardized instrument exists for comparing programs across jurisdictions.

These gaps make it difficult to determine which approaches are most effective, for whom, and under what conditions.

This lack of clarity underscores the need for a national scan.

By systematically examining how probation departments define, structure, and implement emerging adult approaches, this study aims to identify patterns, highlight promising practices, and surface areas for further development and evaluation.



National Scan Survey Design & Recruitment

Justice System Partners (JSP) and the Annie E. Casey Foundation (AECF) partnered to conduct a national scan of specialized probation practices for emerging adults, examining how these approaches are adopted, defined, structured, and implemented across jurisdictions. The scan sought to answer several key questions:

- To what extent are probation departments offering specialized services for emerging adults?
- How are jurisdictions defining emerging adulthood?
- Where do these programs sit within system and administrative structures, and who do they serve?

- How are they staffed and operationalized?
- What types of services are offered?
- What needs are they designed to address?

In 2023 and 2024, a joint working group met regularly to design a survey, identifying key domains such as administrative structures, system characteristics, interventions, and programmatic goals. The working group also refined the survey's language and established a channel for survey distribution and dissemination.

Once finalized, the survey was programmed and pilot-tested in Qualtrics in October 2024 ensuring flow, question clarity, and usability.

JSP compiled contact information for approximately 300 adult and juvenile probation agencies across all 50 states, supplemented by AECF.

From October 2024 through June 2025, JSP conducted direct email outreach, providing each department with two personalized links: one for the full survey and another to confirm the absence of emerging adult-specific services. Follow-up reminders were sent to encourage participation.



Findings

Adoption, Design, and Delivery of Emerging Adult Probation Practices

Across a national scan of probation departments, the findings reveal both growing interest in—and uneven adoption of—specialized approaches for emerging adults.

While a clear majority of jurisdictions report that they do not yet offer tailored services, a meaningful subset has begun to design supervision strategies that reflect the distinct developmental stage of young adults. These early adopters are not operating from a single model; rather, they represent a diverse set of administrative structures, definitions, and implementation approaches.

This potentially suggests probation departments across the country are still grappling with what it means to operationalize emerging adulthood within community supervision.

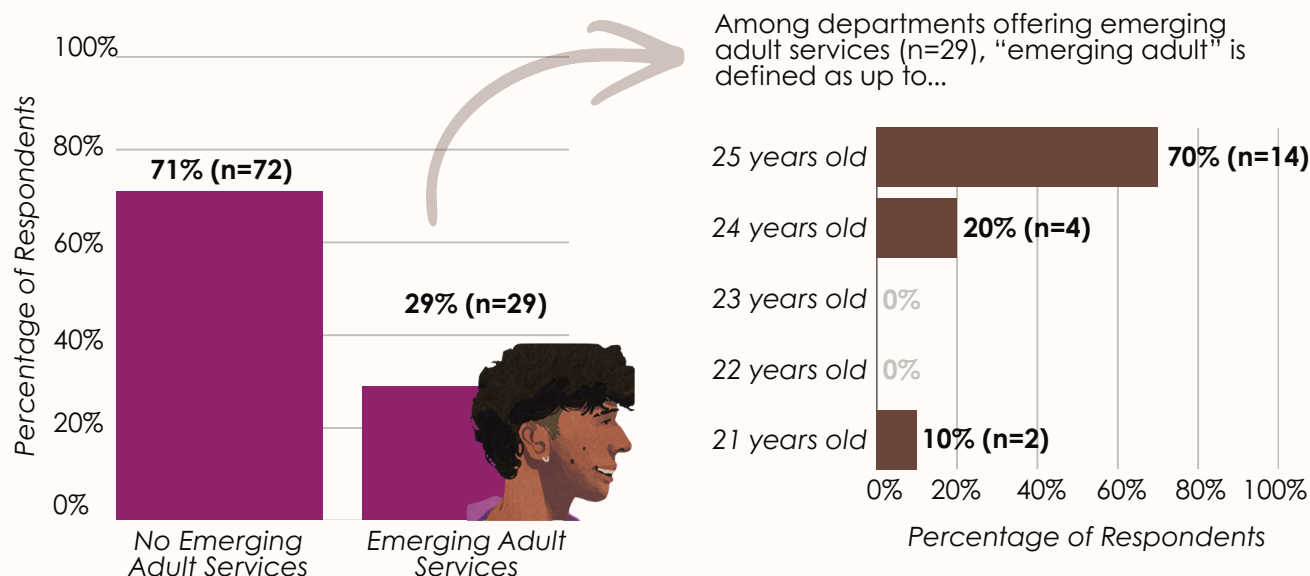
The findings that follow move from landscape to practice: starting with the extent of adoption, then examining how jurisdictions define emerging adulthood and where these programs sit, before turning to how they are staffed, structured, and delivered.

The final sections explore how individuals are assessed and who is served, and ultimately, what these services are designed to address.

Together, these findings surface what is beginning to take form from these early efforts.

The findings below surface what is beginning to take form from these early Emerging Adult efforts.

Figure 1, Adoption of Emerging Adult Services & Definitions of Emerging Adulthood



Adoption of Emerging Adult Services

In total, JSP received 101 completed surveys. Of these, most departments, 71% (n=72) reported they did not have any type of emerging adult services while 29% of departments (n=29) reported that they do, as shown in *Figure 1*.

How Departments Define “Emerging Adult”

Among departments offering specialized services, definitions of emerging adulthood varied but clustered at the upper end of the age range. Most departments (70%, n=14) defined emerging adults as individuals up to age 25. A smaller

proportion (20%, n=4) set the cutoff at age 24, no respondents identified cutoffs at ages 23 or 22, and a few (10%, n=2) defined emerging adulthood as ending at age 21, as shown in *Figure 1*.

Notably, while most surveyed departments overall do not yet offer specialized emerging adult services, those that do most often adopt the oldest age threshold. This pattern suggests a growing alignment among early adopters around extending services through age 25—reflecting an understanding that developmental needs associated with emerging adulthood continue into the mid-twenties.

Where Programs Sit & Who They Serve

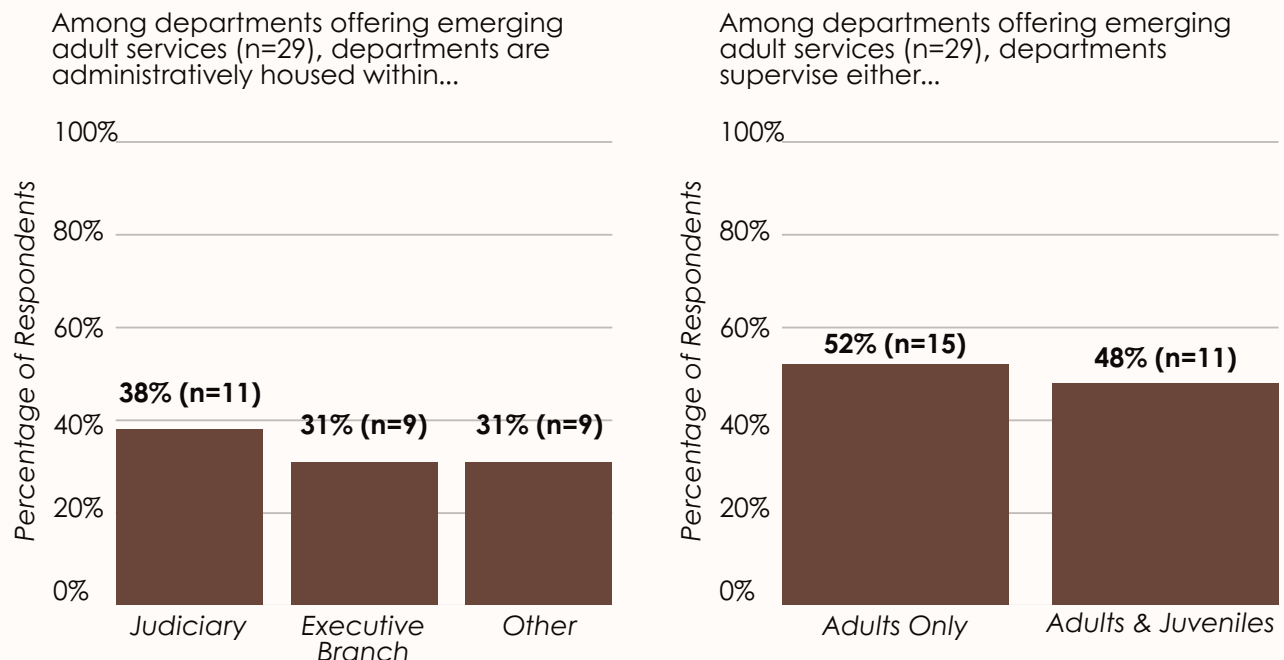
The departments were divided fairly evenly across administrative placement, with 38% (n=11) situated within the judiciary, 31% (n=9) in the executive branch, and 31% (n=9) in other agencies such as city or county government, as shown in *Figure 2*.

Similarly, slightly over half (52%, n=15) of survey participants were in departments that served adults only, while slightly under half (48%, n=14) served both adults and juveniles, as shown in *Figure 2*.

The number of emerging adults under supervision also varied widely across departments, ranging from 8 to 500 individuals (n=20). This variation highlights the differing scale at which jurisdictions are implementing emerging adult approaches.

Taken together, these patterns suggest that emerging adult approaches are not confined to a particular branch of government or system structure. Instead, they point to a growing alignment across jurisdictions that developmental stage—not administrative placement or system designation—should guide how supervision is designed.

Figure 2, Distribution of Administrative Placement and System Type



Staffing & Caseloads

Average caseloads ranged from 12 to 60 individuals (n=15), suggesting there is no standard caseload size and that variation likely reflects differences in intensity of supervision. Departments reported between 1 and 12 probation staff dedicated to serving emerging adults (n=19), indicating that staffing models are adapted to support these varying levels of need.

Types of Specialized Services

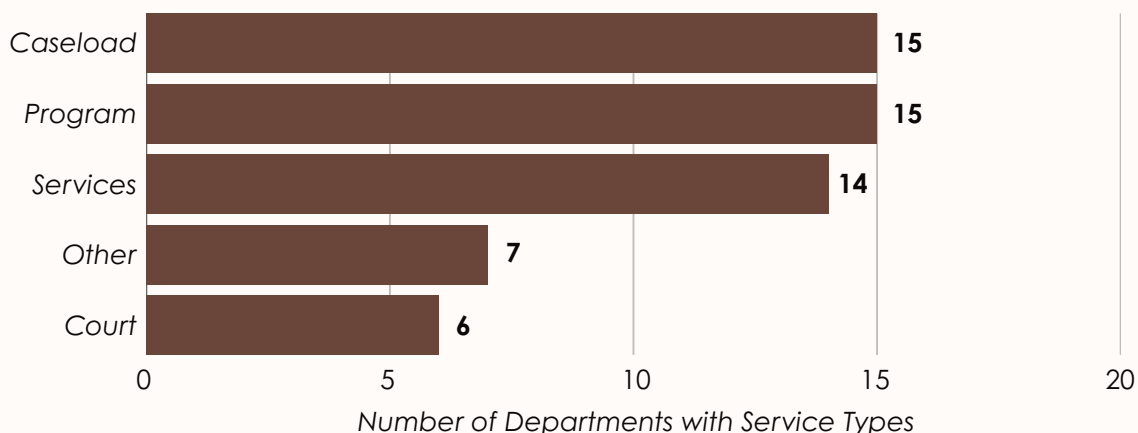
Departments reported a range of approaches to delivering specialized services for emerging adults, often combining multiple strategies. Among the 20 departments that responded to

this question, three-quarters (75%, n=15) indicated they offer specialized caseloads, with the same proportion reporting specialized programs. Slightly fewer (70%, n=14) provide targeted services specifically for emerging adults. About one-third (30%, n=6) reported offering specialized court dockets, while 35% (n=7) described other approaches, including partnerships with correctional facilities, community-based organizations, violence interruption programs, and educational providers, as shown in *Figure 3*.

This variation suggests that jurisdictions are not relying on a single model but are assembling different combinations of structures and partnerships to meet the needs of emerging adults under their care.

Figure 3, Types of Specialized Emerging Adult Services Provided

Among departments offering specialized emerging adult services (n=20), service types include (select all that apply)....



Assessment & Eligibility

Departments also had the option to share information about their assessment types and process, as well as their participant eligibility criteria.

Most frequently, survey respondents reported using the Ohio Risk Assessment System (ORAS), Texas Risk Assessment System (TRAS), Level of Service/Case Management Inventory (LS-CMI) or Level of Service Inventory—Revised (LSI-R), with several survey respondents noting that they used additional, less widely used assessments.

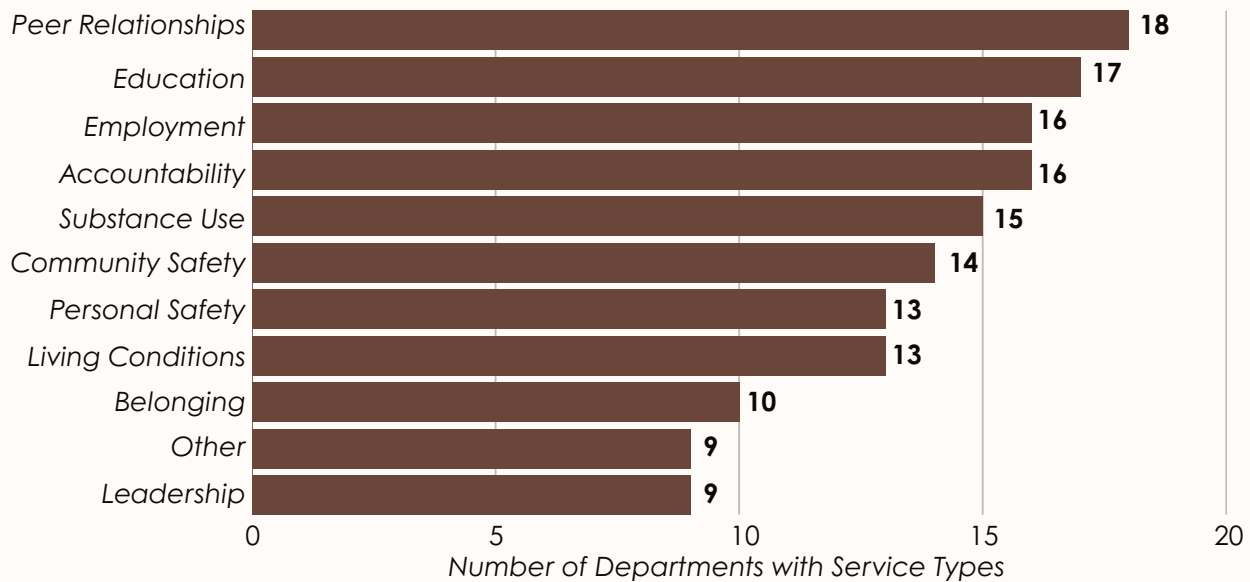
Some programs explain that there are no specific eligibility criteria, and rather determinations are made on a case-by-case basis. Other programs focus on individuals who score high risk/need, while others target individuals aging out of foster care.

Some departments stated that they typically do not accept people with gang, violent, and/or sex offenses.



Figure 4, Areas Targeted by Specialized Emerging Adult Services

Among departments offering specialized emerging adult services (n=20), services address the following areas (select all that apply)....



What Services Address

Among the 20 departments offering specialized emerging adult services that responded to this question, services varied widely in what they aim to address, reflecting the ability of departments to tailor approaches to the needs of emerging adults.

The most cited areas included peer relationships (n=18), education (n=17), employment (n=16), and accountability (n=16). Many programs also focused on substance use (n=14), community safety (n=14), the safety of the emerging adults themselves (n=13), and living conditions (n=13).

Half of respondents (n=10) reported addressing belonging, while others (n=9) focused on leadership and other priorities (n=9), such as support services for family members, as shown in *Figure 4*.

Taken together, these findings highlight the multifaceted and holistic nature of emerging adult approaches, extending beyond supervision to address the broader developmental, social, and environmental factors that shape outcomes.





Conclusion

Key Insights, Implications, and Next Steps for the Field

This survey highlights three key findings about the state of specialized probation services for emerging adults across responding departments.

First, most departments have not yet differentiated their approach for emerging adults. Of the 101 departments that responded, 72 (71%) reported having no specialized programming or services tailored to this population. This suggests that, in most jurisdictions, emerging adults under community supervision are served through standard adult probation models that may not account for their distinct

developmental needs.

Second, among the 29 departments (29%) that do offer specialized services, approaches are most often structured around caseloads and individual officer practice. Three-quarters of these departments reported offering specialized caseloads, pointing to a model that is primarily driven by frontline practice rather than fully embedded, system-level design. While this reflects important progress, it may also indicate that many jurisdictions are still in early stages of implementation, testing approaches within existing structures rather than building comprehensive models.

Third, while emerging research emphasizes the importance of belonging, connection, and opportunities for contribution and leadership as key developmental drivers, the services reported by departments continue to align most closely with the Risk-Need-Responsivity (RNR) model. The most frequently targeted areas—peer relationships, education, and employment and accountability—reflect traditional criminogenic needs. In contrast, fewer programs reported targeting belonging and contribution and leadership, suggesting a gap between emerging developmental science and current practice.

Taken together, these findings point to a field in transition. Probation systems have not yet broadly adapted to the developmental needs of emerging adults—but where change is happening, it signals a clear shift toward developmentally informed supervision that is not yet fully realized at scale. In practice, this shift is emerging unevenly, with jurisdictions adapting approaches across varied system structures, administrative placements, and program designs, often assembling combinations of strategies rather than implementing a single, unified model.

The low proportion of departments with specialized services highlights the need to expand awareness of the unique developmental needs of emerging adults and how probation systems can better support their success. Practitioners, advocates, and researchers have an opportunity to build stronger evidence and share practical guidance with the field.

Future research should examine not only whether specialized programming is effective, but which approaches produce the strongest outcomes and for whom. This includes evaluating both traditional system outcomes, such as revocation and recidivism, and broader measures of success, including mental health, stability, and individuals' lived experiences. Understanding variation across service types and target areas

will be critical to informing more effective and scalable models.

At the same time, departments will need to build organizational capacity to support this shift. This includes investing in professional development that equips staff to move beyond compliance-focused supervision toward approaches that are responsive to developmental needs.

As emerging adult models evolve, there is an opportunity to reorient supervision toward a coaching-based approach that supports growth, stability, and long-term success.

These efforts hold significant potential. By recognizing and responding to the distinct developmental stage of emerging adulthood, probation systems can better support young people during a pivotal period and, in doing so, improve long-term outcomes and reduce future system involvement.

Probation systems have not yet adapted to emerging adults—but where change is happening, it signals a shift toward developmentally informed supervision not yet realized at scale.

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- 91 Survey participants could skip any questions, so the single-item sample size is often less than 29.



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