

Creating Turning Points for Serious Adolescent Offenders: Research on Pathways to Desistance

Adolescent
Development
and Juvenile
Justice

Serious juvenile offenders, those who commit the crimes most feared by the public, such as assaults or other violent crimes, are often sent to secure juvenile institutions or given adult sentences and sent to adult prisons. In the public's mind, these youth are often unlikely to reform, and the juvenile court, with its emphasis on rehabilitation, is often too lenient.

But are they immune to reform? Adolescence is a time of rapid change and maturation, and as the Pathways to Desistance Study¹, underway as an offshoot of the MacArthur Research Network on Adolescent Development and Juvenile Justice, is finding, many of even the most serious offenders make the transition to early adulthood with fewer problems than might be anticipated. The study, which is following 1,355 serious offenders aged 14 to 17 in two cities, finds that a majority of the adolescents report little or no involvement in antisocial activities three years after their involvement with the court. Moreover, a sizable group—about 15%—go from a very high level of involvement to almost none.

This brief presents findings from several ongoing analyses of the Pathways data. As noted above, the study is following a large group of serious juvenile offenders for eight years in Phoenix and Philadelphia. Each youth is interviewed shortly after his or her court appearance, every six months for the first three years, and annually thereafter. The researchers also measure changes in functioning (antisocial or improved behavior) and levels of services and types of sanctions during the follow-up period.

Legal Factors Weigh Heavily in Sentencing Decisions

A first question for the research team was what influenced the sentencing decisions (“dispositions”) among this group of serious offenders. Did age, race, or gender influence whether youth were placed on probation or confined to an institutional setting, such as jail, prison, or a residential treatment facility? Did legal variables matter more (for example, type of offense or prior convictions)? Or did psychological factors, such as mental health or substance use problems, IQ, or developmental maturity, carry more weight?²

They found that, overall, individual personality factors were much less important than legal history in placement decisions. The most consistent predictor of an institutional placement (versus probation) was the number of prior convictions. Gender also played a role in decisions, with males more likely than females to be confined to institutions. However, neither race, age, nor socioeconomic status played a significant independent role in dispositions.

Many Youth with Identified Problems Receive No Targeted Services

Network researchers also analyzed the types of services provided to 868 of these adolescents for two years after their court dispositions to determine whether those youth with identified substance use or mood/anxiety problems—both risk factors for delinquency—received targeted services for those issues while in care. Among the youth in this study, three-fourths were processed in the juvenile system and one-fourth in the adult system. Of those entering the juvenile system, roughly one-half were sent initially to institutional care and one-half were placed on probation; approximately 80% of these adolescents spent some time in institutional care over the two years. The types of institutional care include jail or prison (adult), detention, state-run institutions, contracted residential services, and contracted residential settings with mental health services.

Approximately two thirds of adolescents with identified substance use problems received services for those problems, a rate much higher than usually seen in adolescents in the community with these problems. Most of the substance use services are provided in institutions. Interestingly, youth were more likely to be matched with appropriate services in state facilities or in detention centers than in other settings. In state training schools, for example, youth with substance use issues were four times more likely to receive targeted services than their counterparts not facing these problems, even after controlling for city, gender, race, and number of days in the setting. Even in jails and prisons, offenders with substance use issues were nearly three times more likely to receive targeted services than those without substance use problems—although the numbers receiving such services were quite small (only about 24% of those with substance use problems received any services).

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In contrast, there were no statistically significant differences between adolescents with identified problems and other adolescents in the types of services received in contracted residential services. Regardless of risk status, about 36% and 56% of youth in these settings reported receiving mental health or substance use services, respectively. The figures were higher in contracted mental health settings, although again the differences between youth with and without identified problems were not statistically significant.

The findings belie the common lore about the deplorable condition of state-run facilities. In this study, adolescents received a broad range of generally appropriate services in state-run institutions. On the other hand, contracted residential services appear to provide a more general package of services to all adolescents in these settings.

Parenting Practices and Substance Use Treatment Are Related to Reoffending

What is it that helps youth reform and desist from delinquency? The Pathways study is beginning to tease out the many elements that can combine to redirect serious youth offenders. Past research points to several possible reasons for a change of course, including maturing; assuming adult roles, such as work and family; changing one's self-conception coupled with a new resolve; a turning point in life; or the result of direct interventions, such as substance use or mental health treatments. Two recent studies by the Network point also to the importance of family and social context as possibly important points of intervention.

Parenting Matters

One of the hallmarks of adolescence is the growing search for autonomy from parents and the expanding reliance on peers. Given the importance of parental monitoring in keeping youth out of harm's way and the centrality of parental involvement in some of the more successful interventions for delinquents,³ it certainly seems reasonable to explore how parents might provide the supports to assist youth as they seek more autonomy, while still keeping them out of trouble.

Network researchers again turned to the Pathways study to examine how parenting might matter. As seen in community samples of adolescents, juvenile offenders who described their parents as warm and firm (sometimes labeled authoritative) were more mature, more academically competent, less prone to internalized distress, and less likely to engage in problem behavior than their peers.⁴ In contrast, adolescent offenders who described their parents as neglectful (neither warm nor firm) were less mature, less competent, and more troubled. Youth who characterized their parents as authoritarian (firm but lacking warmth) or indulgent (warm but not firm) fell somewhere between the two extremes.

The study also lends some support to the contention that authoritarian parenting in highly distressed neighborhoods may be more beneficial to youth, protecting them from harm. Unlike middle-class suburban youth, who often have poorer outcomes when parents are authoritarian, youth in distressed neighborhoods in this study were not as negatively affected—although this parenting style was still not ideal. Parental control, and not necessarily warmth, appears to be the important factor for young offenders.

Neighborhood disorder, high poverty, and crime can increase the likelihood that youth will associate with negative peers and commit crimes. Network researchers find, however, that the link between neighborhood disorder, deviant peers, and crime is partially explained by parenting practices.⁵ Parents who knew where their teens were, knew their friends, and established firm ground rules and expectations were more effective in keeping their children away from trouble, even when neighborhood influences could have been negative. These results suggest that although youth returning to more fragile neighborhoods are at higher risk for crime, families can indeed help. How well parents monitor youth matters, regardless of neighborhood quality.

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Treating Substance Use Matters In the Short Run

If interventions can reach youth struggling with substance use, the impact, at least in the short run, could be sizable. Using Pathways data, Network researchers analyzed the associations between drug treatment, continued substance use, and continued offending change. They find that treatment—even after controlling for age, race, gender, initial substance use, and time in a correctional facility—was associated with a decline of 15-16% in substance use over the course of the next six months, and a 15-18% decline in future offending over the same time period. Further, the treatment itself explained a sizable proportion of that decline.

In other words, although youth in general reported less offending over successive interviews (in line with previous findings that even severe adolescent offenders desist over time), these

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reductions in offending were partially explained by treatment-related reductions in alcohol and drug use. It should also be noted that the substance use treatments were quite varied, and not specialized, highly controlled “research” interventions, which holds out hope that even the most commonly used treatments can help youth avoid future offending.

Serious Youth Offenders Are Not All Cut from the Same Cloth

Perhaps the main point to be drawn from these various studies of serious youth offenders is the considerable variability and possible malleability among those at the “deep end” of the juvenile justice system. Their skills and problems range widely. Some do not drink or use drugs, others do. A small portion continues to offend at a high level, while others desist from crime. Some have complex mental health problems, and others have a varied treatment or placement history. What is clear is that these adolescents are not all cut from the same cloth. As a result, uniform responses to their offending are destined to miss the opportunity to capitalize on their range of abilities and capacities for positive change.

¹ Mulvey, E., Steinberg, L., Fagan, J., Cauffman, E., Piquero, A., Chassin, L., Knight, G., Brame, R., Schubert, C., Hecker, T., & Losoya, S. (2004). Theory and research on desistance from antisocial activity among adolescent serious offenders. *Journal of Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice*, 2, 213-236.

² The researchers used a multivariate regression analysis to analyze which among a large set of factors (including demographic, legal, and environmental) best predicted the disposition decision—either an institutional placement or probation. The factors analyzed were age, race, gender, parent’s education level, current and past legal involvement, type of crime, number of arrests in past year, any prior offenses, the individual’s psychosocial maturity, mental health or substance abuse issues, IQ, gang involvement, family structure (one or two-parent families), and school performance.

³ Cunningham, P., & Henggeler, S. (1999). Engaging multiproblem families in treatment: Lessons learned throughout the development of multisystemic therapy. *Family Process*, 38, 265-286.

⁴ See Steinberg, L., Blatt-Eisengart, I., & Cauffman, E. (2006). Patterns of competence and adjustment among adolescents from authoritative, authoritarian, indulgent, and neglectful homes: A replication in a sample of serious juvenile offenders. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 16 (1), 47-58.

⁵ Chung, H.L., & Steinberg, L. (2006). Relations between neighborhood factors, parenting behaviors, peer deviance, and delinquency among serious juvenile offenders. *Developmental Psychology*, 42 (2), 319-331.

For more information

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The Research Network on Adolescent Development and Juvenile Justice is an interdisciplinary, multi-institutional program focused on building a foundation of sound science and legal scholarship to support reform of the juvenile justice system. The network conducts research, disseminates the resulting knowledge to professionals and the public, and works to improve decision-making and to prepare the way for the next generation of juvenile justice reform.