

background

Report # 89

Pathways To Desistance Study

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Growing Up And Going Straight

Understanding why many adolescent offenders 'age out' of a life of crime

Crime data grouped by the age of the perpetrator almost always follows the same trajectory, regardless of the nature of the crime. Criminal activity climbs dramatically through the teenage years, peaks in late adolescence or early adulthood, then plunges as perpetrators move through their twenties.

Studies suggest that most juvenile offenders somehow manage to settle down or “age out” of committing crimes. This phenomenon, known as “desistance,” so far raises more questions than researchers can answer. What factors steer juveniles away from crime? Are other life changes involved? Does treatment help? What about sanctions?

The answers to such questions could lead to more effective treatments and sanctions, the ability to divert more young people from criminal activity, and to lower juvenile crime rates.

The benefits of understanding desistance are seen as so important that a major long-term study examining the phenomenon has attracted support from foundations, state governments, juvenile justice organizations – even the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

“These kids have done serious things as adolescents, but they stop their involvement in criminal activity and drug use in their twenties or so,” said the principal investigator of the Pathways to Desistance study, Edward P. Mulvey, Ph.D., University of Pittsburgh Professor of Psychiatry, Law and Psychiatry Program at Western Psychiatric Institute and Clinic.

“We are trying to describe that process of stopping that they go

through. The logic being that what we learn could inform programming, because that process of desistance is what we want to promote.”

In the Pathways to Desistance study, researchers at the University of Pittsburgh, Temple University in Philadelphia, and Arizona State University are following 1,300 serious juvenile offenders in Philadelphia and Phoenix – some of whom have been in the study since 2001 – to learn how, why, and under what circumstances they grow out of committing crime.

A Shift In Juvenile Justice

In the past decade or so, almost every state has changed statutes addressing juvenile offenders to allow for easier transfer of adolescents to adult court. This emphasis on “law and order” statutes marks a seismic shift in the nation’s approach to juvenile justice.

In many ways, the trend reverts to the way courts dealt with young offend-

Tougher sanctions on juvenile offenders and placing them in adult courts haven’t emerged as effective deterrents. But understanding how and why many quit crime on their own may open the door to better ways of steering adolescents away from committing crimes.

ers before America’s first juvenile court was established in Cook County, Illinois in 1899. That court created a justice system separate from adult courts that focused on the offender, not the offense, and on rehabilitation and prevention, rather than punishment. Such courts flourished throughout the 20th century.

That began to change in the late 1980s when steep and steady increases in juvenile crime rates, particularly violent crime, alarmed citizens and policymakers alike and eroded confidence in the treatment model embraced by juvenile courts.

The spate of transfer statutes that followed have made it easier for juvenile offenders to be tried as adults in adult courts and to be sentenced as adults. The type of offenses they commit carry greater weight in deciding how they will be dealt with. And the harsher sanctions imposed are based more on the desire to protect and to punish than on rehabilitat-

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ing the young offender.

Little evidence has been reported to suggest this shift is an effective deterrent or an instrument for reforming serious juvenile offenders. In fact, studies in New York, New Jersey, and Florida suggest juvenile offenders transferred to adult courts commit more serious crimes sooner after they are released.

Some characteristics of adolescent offenders also raise questions about efficacy of tilting juvenile justice more toward punishment than treatment. About 50% of adolescents in secure juvenile facilities have a mental disorder. And juvenile arrests peak at age 16, then fall off sharply, suggesting age-related maturity and judgment play key roles in juvenile offending.

Simply relying on the definition of the crime to determine how to adjudicate juvenile offenders "is terribly inefficient," said Dr. Mulvey. "We are going to waste a lot of resources. It's a lousy way of sorting kids."

Exploring 'Desistance'

A more effective way of dealing with juvenile crime may be found in how and why many young offenders simply quit criminal activities.

The adolescents in the Pathways to Desistance study sample have all been found guilty of a serious crime, including drug offenses, aggravated assault, and sex offenses. The sanctions imposed on them cover a broad range, including probation and incarceration in state prison general populations.

About 86% are male and three-quarters are minorities. Their average IQ was 85, putting them in the 16th percentile among peers. About 75% were in some kind of serious trouble – drug use, stealing, fighting – before age 11.

Investigators hope to identify the initial patterns involved in serious ado-

lescent offenders who stop their antisocial activity; describe the role of social context and developmental changes in promoting these positive changes; and to compare the effects of sanctions and interventions in promoting such changes.

The study is funded by the John D. & Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation's Research Network on Adolescent Development and Juvenile Justice, the National Institute of Justice, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the William T. Grant Foundation, the William Penn Foundation, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and the States of Pennsylvania and Arizona.

"We're looking at some of the changes that occur in their lives that have more or less power in getting them hooked into more conventional lifestyles," said Dr. Mulvey. "How important is it to be working? What are the patterns of work among these kids that seem to get them to be financially independent? What are the patterns of relationships? Does marriage help these kids get it together? Where should efforts be focused to get them on the right track?"

Early data already provide some insight into adolescent offenders. Pathways to Desistance data were recently used to study how parenting is related to behavior and psychological outcomes of

high-risk adolescents. It was found, for example, that offenders who describe their parents as authoritative tend to be more psychologically and socially mature, academically competent, and less prone to internalizing and externalizing problems. Those who describe their parents as neglectful tend to be less mature, less competent, and more troubled.

The early data also confirm the strong link between drug and alcohol use and delinquency – and reports show that treatment works to lower substance use and to reduce offending among juveniles. The data also suggest that offenders who had clear substance abuse or mental health problems were more likely to be matched with the services they needed in secure public facilities, such as detention centers. Overall, however, the system struggles to match juvenile offenders with appropriate facilities and treatment.

Such findings underscore the potential of the study to contribute the kind of empirical information on juvenile offenders, their risk for future offending, and their responses to sanctions and rehabilitation that has been lacking in the debate that is reshaping America's system of juvenile justice.



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