

# Research on Pathways to Desistance

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## Pathways to Desistance

### A First Look at Emerging Findings

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Juveniles can commit serious and sometimes violent offenses, from felony burglary to murder. Their crimes are appalling. But only a minority of these serious offenders will go on to a lifetime of repeated crime; the rest will have relatively little involvement in illegal activity. Nevertheless, they present a challenge to the juvenile justice system. And they fuel an ongoing debate among professionals and in society at large.

The sanctions applied to serious juvenile offenders vary widely from one jurisdiction to the next. Even within a given jurisdiction, different youths may receive very different sanctions for similar offenses. Some will spend time in a secure facility, where they may (or may not) receive a range of services. Some are put on probation, with or without a treatment program. Others are sentenced to community service.

How do these sanctions and services affect the trajectories of the offenders' lives? And what measures could put them on a more positive path? Answering these questions could help us write better policy, make better use of scarce resources, and better serve both the young offenders and the communities in which they live.

That is the impetus behind **Pathways to Desistance**, a large, multi-site, collaborative project following 1,354 juvenile offenders for seven years after their conviction.<sup>1</sup> Pathways is the most intense look to date at the outcomes of sanctions and services – feedback that is rarely available to decision-makers in the juvenile justice system.

The ongoing study already has published some important findings:

- Adolescents who become involved in serious crimes are not a particular “type” but a heterogeneous group, much like their non-offending peers. The differences among them are seldom considered by courts, nor are they translated by service providers into different types of intervention.
- Nothing in the basic psychological or social characteristics of these adolescents strongly predicts which will go on to a lifetime of crime and which will curtail their offending after court involvement.
- Longer stays in juvenile facilities do not appear to reduce offending. However, continued probation supervision and community-based services provided after a youth is released do make a difference, at least in the six months following release.
- Substance abuse is a major factor in continued criminal activity. Treating substance abuse can reduce subsequent offending.

Pathways is a unique study in the field of juvenile justice: in its goals, its subjects, its longitudinal nature, its comprehensive scope, and its findings. These and other aspects of the project are explored in more detail on the following pages.

## **What broad questions is Pathways exploring?**

The investigators are trying to unravel what it is that reduces the severity and frequency of criminal activity among the majority of young offenders – or in any individual youth. Is there a relationship between the sanctions and services they receive and the future trajectory of their lives? Do other factors, internal or external, account for the difference? What can we learn about these adolescents that will allow the juvenile justice system to respond more effectively and prevent future criminal activity?

## **How could the results of the study be used?**

The intent of the Pathways team is to provide policymakers and practitioners with analyses that can guide the development of a more rational, effective, and developmentally appropriate juvenile justice system. Some findings will be relevant to decisions made at disposition, such as what kinds of placement or community-based services are most appropriate for which individuals, and for how long. Some could be used to improve institutional and community-based services, or to determine at what point in the process they should be offered. Some findings may suggest the need to involve families, schools, and other institutions in new or existing solutions.

## **Who are the subjects of the study?**

The study has followed a sample of juveniles who committed major offenses when they were 14 to 17 years old. Their crimes were the most serious felonies that come before the court, including murder, robbery, aggravated assault, sex offenses, and kidnapping. About 70 percent of the subjects have had one or more prior petitions to court. Nearly one-fifth were processed in the adult system.

They are an ethnically diverse group: 25 percent White, 44 percent African-American, 29 percent Hispanic, and 2 percent “other.” While the majority are male, 13 percent are female.

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## **How is the study conducted?**

Investigators interview the adolescents, their family members, and their friends at specific time points for seven years after their conviction. The team has completed about 90 percent of the interviews with the subjects – more than 25,000 in all. Sadly, a high proportion of this group (about 4 percent) died during these years, most of them victims of homicide.

## **What sort of information is collected?**

Over seven years, Pathways has constructed the richest source of information currently available about how serious adolescent offenders mature and what happens to them as they make the transition from adolescence to early adulthood.<sup>2,3</sup> The interviews cover a wide range of topics: psychological development, mental health, behavior, attitudes, family and community context, and relationships. The investigators also gather month-by-month information on significant life events such as living arrangements, employment, education, romantic relationships, and involvement with the legal and social service systems.

Using official records from the Federal Bureau of Investigation and local courts, the investigators document arrests and the sanctions and services the young offenders receive.

As of August, 2009, the working group and its collaborators had published about 30 papers and made almost 100 presentations based on these data.

### Are the serious offenders markedly different from other young people?

Not necessarily. There is considerable variability among these adolescents – as there is in any group of adolescents – in their background characteristics, their family environments, and their attitudes towards the law.<sup>4,5,6</sup> They appear, in many ways, very similar to other adolescents in their communities, both psychologically and socially, and they develop along similar pathways.

There is a higher incidence among these adolescents of certain risk markers, such as substance abuse, parents who offended, and being in special education. But we know from other studies that rates of offending among adolescents in general are much higher than rates of being caught or convicted; many of the adolescents in this study may be in the system largely because, unlike their peers, they were caught.

### What sanctions did these adolescents receive for their offenses?

About half of the offenders were placed in juvenile or adult facilities. These ranged from jails and prisons, to boot camps, to institutional settings that look much like a high school or college campus. Some of these were therapeutically intense settings, while others offered fewer services.

The other half received community-based sanctions or services. In some cases, this meant simply checking in with a probation officer. Others received more intensive supervision. And others received a mix of probation and services such as group sessions, substance abuse treatment, or family therapy.

### Do most of them continue to commit crimes?

Despite their involvement in serious crime, these adolescents are not uniformly “bad” kids on the road to a lifetime of criminal activity. In fact, the majority reported engaging in few or no illegal activities after court involvement.

In one set of analyses, the investigators identified five distinct groups that followed different patterns of change in their illegal activity over the first 36 months of follow-up (see Figure 1).<sup>7</sup>

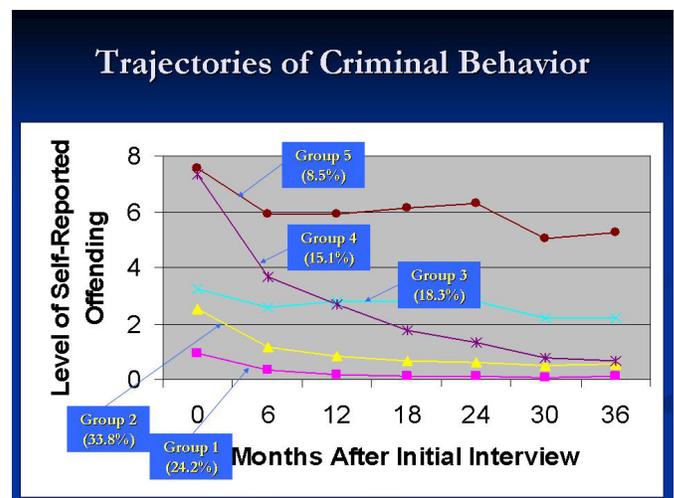


Figure 1

Three of these groups showed different, but relatively stable, low levels of offending. A fourth group started at a high level of offending and dropped off to a very low level. The fifth group – just 8.5 percent of the total – started at a high level of offending and continued at this high level.

In short, the vast majority of the adolescents in the study reported very limited involvement in illegal activity in the three years following their court involvement. A strikingly large proportion of those who had been offending at high levels dramatically reduced their illegal activities during the first few years of the study.

### **Is it possible to predict which adolescents will fall into which group?**

The ability to predict future criminal activity would be of great interest to the courts where youths are adjudicated, and the study sought to answer this important question. Unfortunately, despite the detailed information collected on these adolescents, predictions were elusive.

The initial baseline interview of Pathways gathers far more information about juveniles' personality, behavior, history, and life circumstances than is typically available to any court. Yet the investigators found that baseline characteristics – demographics, psychosocial characteristics, attitudes, and even prior offending history – are not very useful for differentiating the “persisters” from the “desisters.” The likelihood of effectively distinguishing them at disposition is low.

### **Does desistance from crime match the treatment offenders receive?**

It doesn't seem to. The investigators found, to their surprise, that persisters and desisters received about the same type of treatment in the justice system: they spent, on average, the same amount of time in the same types of institutions.

Institutional placements are widely used with this group of offenders. Even those adolescents who reported very low levels of involvement in subsequent antisocial activity nevertheless spent a sizable proportion of the follow-up period (about 30 percent of this time) in institutional care. However, among these “low level” offenders, institutional placement raised the level of offending by a small, but statistically significant, amount.

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This may mean that expensive institutional placements are often being used in cases where there is little need for such an investment – and where it may in fact be counterproductive. It is worth considering whether the general pattern of locking up such a large proportion of these adolescents is producing many positive results.

### **Given the prominent role of institutional placement in the juvenile justice system, does the Pathways study suggest any guidelines?**

It offers food for thought. A key question for juvenile justice policy is whether and how long to keep juvenile offenders in facilities in order to maximize both public safety and the therapeutic benefits to the offender. The study addressed this question first by grouping subjects with very similar background characteristics and comparing those who had been placed in institutions to those given probation. They examined whether institutional placement led to any reduction in the rates of re-arrest or self-reported

illegal activity, and found that both groups were equally likely or unlikely to re-offend. On these measures, at least, institutional placement appears to have no advantage to over probation.

The investigators also looked at the length of stay for those in juvenile institutional care, to see if there was any marginal gain from longer stays.<sup>8</sup> Again, they found no significant benefits from a longer stay (see Figure 2).

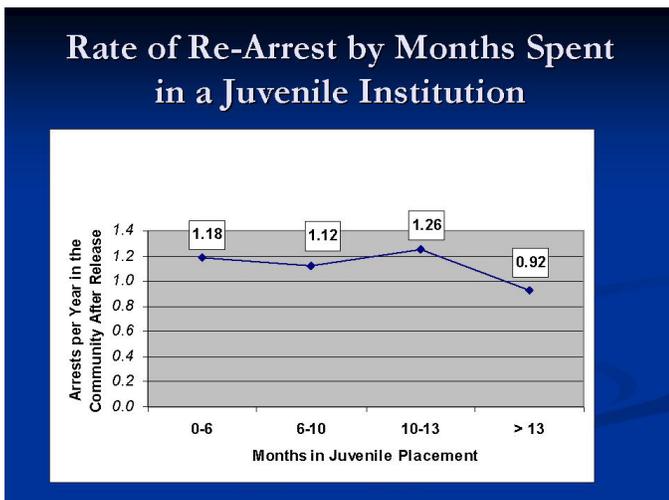


Figure 2

Institutional placement is a very costly undertaking. The Pathways findings highlight the need to reconsider the costs and benefits of locking up adolescents, even those committing the most serious crimes. As part of that reconsideration, however, we need to carefully examine the effects of treatments provided in institutional care; determine which, if any, make a difference in behavior for which offenders; and consider whether they can be offered with equal success in a community setting.

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**Closer consideration of differences among offending youths could lead to more tailored, more effective services.**

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### **Is there anything we can learn about individual offenders that might be relevant to deciding what sanctions and services they receive?**

Sanctions are often meted out on the basis of the severity of the crime and the number of prior convictions. Courts do not generally assess individual needs in depth and match them to particular services.

The Pathways study suggests that it might be feasible to do so. The study found that individual adolescent offenders differ substantially from one another on a number of relevant dimensions: parenting styles, social development, the timing of psychological development, mental health, attitudes toward the law, and the level of substance abuse. Closer consideration of these differences by the courts and service providers could lead to more tailored, more effective services.

### **Is substance abuse treatment a good example of the potential of tailored services?**

It's one of the clearest examples. Substance use is strongly related to continued criminal activity in this group, and it makes sense to focus on this behavior for intervention. In fact, the study shows that treatment for substance use can reduce offending.

Levels of substance use and associated problems are very high in these young offenders. More than one-third qualify for a diagnosis of substance use disorder in the year prior to the baseline interview, and over 80 percent report having used drugs or alcohol during the previous six months. Moreover, the level of substance use walks in lockstep with illegal activity over the follow-up period: more substance use, more criminal offending.<sup>9</sup>

Adolescent offenders with substance use disorders don't always receive treatment for these problems. When they do, though, it appears to work. The investigators examined treatment-related reductions in alcohol and marijuana use, cigarette smoking, and non-drug offending during the first year post-treatment.<sup>10</sup> Although the study doesn't test any single, new intervention for substance use, it does provide an excellent opportunity to examine how well the standard treatments affect later adjustment. Results indicate that drug treatment significantly reduced substance use for about six months, and that this reduction was more than simply an effect of the adolescents being locked up in a controlled environment. Subsequent criminal offending also was reduced – but only when treatment included family involvement.

The bottom line: ongoing substance use treatment for serious juvenile offenders appears to pay off, but the key is including family in the intervention.

### **What happens to young offenders after they're released from an institution? Can services at that point make a difference?**

The study indicates that aftercare services do make a difference.

Because the project collects monthly data about institutional placement, probation, and involvement in community-based services, investigators were able to examine the effects of aftercare services for the six months after a court-ordered placement (the period for such services in many locales). They looked specifically at the effects these services had on community adjustment: going to school or working, getting arrested or placed back in a facility, or self-reported illegal activity.<sup>11</sup>

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### **Ongoing substance use treatment for serious juvenile offenders appears to pay off. The key is including family in the intervention.**

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The intensity of community-based services for the returning offenders was generally low – supervision was more common than involvement with treatment-oriented agencies. Nevertheless, the analyses showed that when adolescents did receive supervision and were involved in community-based services, they were significantly more likely to avoid further involvement with the legal system and to attend school or work more regularly. Continued aftercare supervision and service involvement in the six months after institutional placement, as delivered in the real world, appear to have a positive effect.

These results highlight the importance of investing resources in community-based aftercare programs. Though institutional care in general seems to have a limited impact on later criminal activity, establishing a wider array of sanctions and services might well produce more positive outcomes.

### **Where does the Pathways project go from here?**

The findings presented here are just a first look at the potential of the Pathways study. Much work is yet to be done on the dynamic nature of these adolescents' lives, the factors that promote positive adjustment during late adolescence and early adulthood, and the effectiveness of the juvenile justice system.

The investigators believe that the greatest potential lies in examining the diversity of the subjects – the differences in their backgrounds, personalities, development, attitudes, and responses – and how those differences relate to various interventions and

outcomes. If serious offenders were a homogeneous group, it would make sense to simply link sanctions to the severity of the crime and hope for a uniform reduction in future offending. But given their diversity, there may be other ways to group young offenders and apply interventions that produce better results, for them and for society.

Another promising line of inquiry appears to be identifying the positive life events that occurred during the follow-up period. Preliminary results suggest adolescents who are better integrated into the community by a stable living situation and more routine lives, by school or employment, or by a positive romantic relationship are less likely to be involved in illegal activity. Whether there is a causal relationship remains to be tested.

**For more information on Pathways to Desistance, please write to the project coordinator, Carol Schubert, at [schubertca@upmc.edu](mailto:schubertca@upmc.edu).**

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The Pathways project is doing more than answering specific questions. It is creating a huge database – a research infrastructure – that will be freely accessible to researchers outside the project. With continuing progress, in policy and in research, we can have a fairer, more effective, and more cost-effective juvenile justice system.

<sup>1</sup> The study grew out of the efforts of the MacArthur Foundation Research Network on Adolescent Development and Juvenile Justice. It is funded by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), the National Institute of Justice (NIJ), the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the William Penn Foundation, the William T. Grant Foundation, the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency, the Arizona Juvenile Justice Commission, and the National Institute on Drug Abuse. A multidisciplinary working group of investigators have collaborated on the study since its inception and continue to analyze data and publish findings. In alphabetical order, they are Robert Brame, Ph.D., Elizabeth Cauffman, Ph.D., Laurie Chassin, Ph.D., Jeffrey Fagan, Ph.D., George Knight, Ph.D., Edward Mulvey, Ph.D., Sandra Losoya, Ph.D., Alex Piquero, Ph.D., Carol Schubert, M.P.H., and Laurence Steinberg, Ph.D.

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<sup>8</sup> Loughran, T., Mulvey, E. P., Schubert, C. A., Fagan, J., Losoya, S. H., Piquero, A. R. (2009). Estimating a Dose-Response Relationship between Length of Stay and Future Recidivism in Serious Juvenile Offenders. *Criminology*, 47, 699-740.

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<sup>10</sup> Chassin, L., Knight, G., Vargas-Chanes, D., Losoya, S., Naranjo, D. (2009). Substance use treatment outcomes in a sample of male serious juvenile offenders. *Journal of Substance Abuse Treatment*, 36(2), 183-194.

<sup>11</sup> Chung, H. L., Schubert, C. A., Mulvey, E.P. (2007) An empirical portrait of community reentry among serious juvenile offenders in two metropolitan cities. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 34 (11), 1402-1426.