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Highlights From Pathways to Desistance: A Longitudinal Study of Serious Adolescent Offenders

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The Pathways to Desistance Study is a large collaborative, multidisciplinary project that is following 1,354 serious juvenile offenders ages 14–18 (184 females and 1,170 males) for 7 years after their conviction (for more detailed information, see "Study Design").[1] This study has collected the most comprehensive data set currently available about serious adolescent offenders and their lives in late adolescence and early adulthood. It looks at the factors that lead youth who have committed serious offenses to continue or desist from offending, including individual maturation, life changes, and involvement with the criminal justice system.

Study Findings

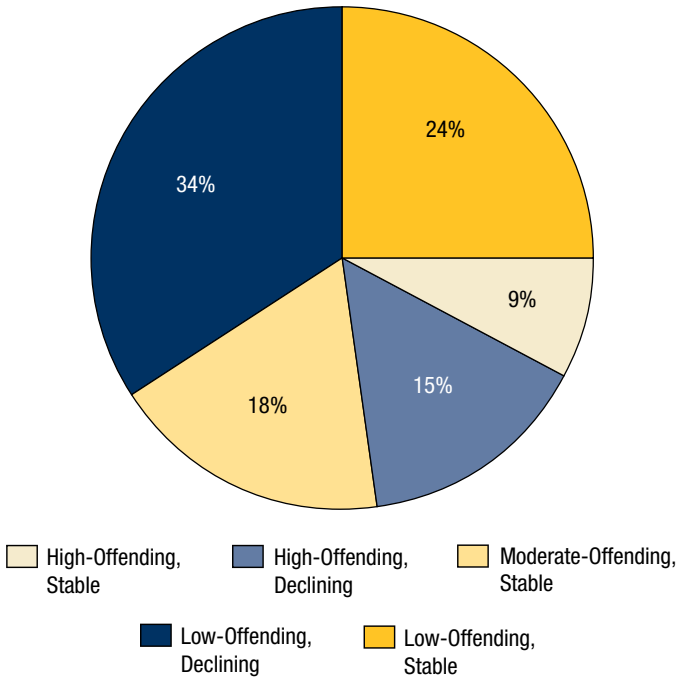
The primary findings of the study to date deal with the decrease in self-reported offending over time by most serious adolescent offenders, the relative inefficacy of longer juvenile incarcerations in decreasing recidivism, the effectiveness of community-based supervision as a component of aftercare for incarcerated youth, and the effectiveness of substance abuse treatment in reducing both substance use and offending by serious adolescent offenders.

Most youth who commit felonies greatly reduce their offending over time, regardless of the intervention. Approximately 91.5 percent of youth in the study reported decreased or limited illegal activity during the first 3 years following their court involvement. In particular, two groups of male offenders—those with high, stable offending rates, and those with high, but declining offending rates—had very different outcomes despite similar treatment by the juvenile justice system (see figure 1). For both groups, approximately 40 percent of offenders were in jail or prison across the 3-year followup period (see "Study Design"); each group also had similar percentages under detention or in a contracted residential placement (about 20 percent of each group was in each of these forms of supervision). Overall, approximately 50 percent of the youth in each group were under some form of supervision during the followup period, and about 20 percent were receiving community-based services.

Key Points

- Most youth who commit felonies greatly reduce their offending over time.
- Longer stays in juvenile institutions do not reduce recidivism.
- In the period after incarceration, community-based supervision is effective for youth who have committed serious offenses.
- Substance abuse treatment reduces both substance use and criminal offending for a limited time.

Figure 1: Groups of Male Offenders, Based on Self-Reports of Offending



Therefore, institutional placement and the type of setting appeared to have little effect on which high-end offenders persisted in offending and which reduced their offending (Mulvey et al., 2010).

Longer stays in juvenile institutions do not reduce recidivism, and some youth who had the lowest offending levels reported committing more crimes after being incarcerated. The researchers looked at two groups of cases that were adjudicated in juvenile court at both the Philadelphia and metropolitan Phoenix sites. Of 921 offenders who remained in the juvenile system, 502 received probation and 419 were placed in institutions. The researchers then matched the two groups based on 66 variables that would affect the probability that an individual offender would be placed in an institution to rule out those variables as potential causes of different outcomes between the placement and probation groups. After 64 of those 66 variables were ruled out, the two groups showed no significant differences in their rate either of rearrest or of self-reported offending. Also, when the researchers matched groups of offenders with similar backgrounds, they found that, for lengths of stay between 3 and 13 months, youth who stayed in institutions longer showed little or no decrease in their rates of rearrest compared with those with shorter stays (Loughran et al., 2009). Moreover, in another set of analyses, the study found that the group of offenders with the lowest levels of self-reported offending actually raised their levels of offending by a small but statistically significant amount following stays in institutions (Mulvey et al., 2010).

Community-based supervision as a component of aftercare is effective for youth who have committed serious offenses, and offenders who receive community-based services following incarceration are more likely to attend school, go to work, and reduce offending. 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 6 months after a court-ordered placement (the period when such services are presumably provided with greater intensity in most locales). Increasing the duration of community supervision reduced reported reoffending. In addition, although returning offenders generally received supervision only, rather than treatment, the research showed that in the 6 months after release, youth who were involved in community-based services were more likely to avoid further involvement with the juvenile justice system (Chung, Schubert, and Mulvey, 2007).

Substance abuse treatment reduces both substance use and criminal offending, at least in the short term. Research has consistently shown that substance use among adolescents is linked to serious juvenile offending. The adolescent offenders profiled in the Pathways to Desistance study reported very high levels of substance use and substance use problems.[2] Substance use was linked to other illegal activities engaged in by the study participants. It is a strong, prevalent predictor of offending. The presence of a drug or alcohol disorder and the level of substance use

Study Design

The study involved extensive interviews with young offenders at enrollment, followup interviews every 6 months for the first 3 years and annually thereafter, interviews following release from residential facilities, collateral interviews with family members and friends, data collection about significant life events recorded at the monthly level, and reviews of official records data. Enrollment took place between November 2000 and March 2003, and the research team concluded data collection in 2010.

The study followed young offenders in two metropolitan areas: Maricopa County (metropolitan Phoenix), AZ, and Philadelphia County, PA. Youth enrollees in the study were 14 to 17 years old and found guilty of at least one serious (almost exclusively felony-level) violent crime, property offense, or drug offense as the result of their current petition to court. The study limited the proportion of male drug offenders to 15 percent at each site to ensure a heterogeneous sample of serious offenders. Because investigators also wanted to ensure a large enough sample of female offenders—a group neglected in previous research—they did not apply this limit to female drug offenders. In addition, youth whose cases were considered for trial in the adult criminal justice system were still enrolled.

were both shown to be strongly and independently related to the level of self-reported offending and the number of arrests. This relationship held even when drug-related offenses and behaviors were removed from the offending measures, and characteristics including socioeconomic status, gender, and ethnicity were controlled statistically (Mulvey, Schubert, and Chassin, 2010). The good news, however, is that treatment appears to reduce both substance use and offending, at least in the short term. Youth whose treatment lasted for at least 90 days and included significant family involvement showed significant reductions in alcohol use, marijuana use, and offending over the following 6 months (Chassin et al., 2009).

Conclusions

The most important conclusion of the study is that even adolescents who have committed serious offenses are not necessarily on track for adult criminal careers. Only a small proportion of the offenders studied continued to offend at a high level throughout the followup period. The great majority reported low levels of offending after court involvement, and a significant portion of those with the highest levels of offending reduced their reoffending dramatically. Two factors that appear to distinguish high-end desisters from persisters are lower levels of substance use and greater stability in their daily routines, as measured by stability in living arrangements and work and school attendance.

The second conclusion is that incarceration may not be the most appropriate or effective option, even for many of the most serious adolescent offenders. Longer stays in juvenile facilities did not reduce reoffending; institutional placement even raised offending levels in those with the lowest level of offending. Youth who received community-based supervision and aftercare services were more likely to attend school, go to work, and avoid further offending during the 6 months after release, and longer supervision periods increased these benefits.

Finally, substance use is a major factor in continued criminal activity by serious adolescent offenders. Substance abuse treatment for young offenders reduces both substance use and non-drug-related offending in the short term, if the treatment period is long enough and if families take part in the treatment with the offender. Most young offenders who are diagnosed with substance abuse disorders, however, do receive treatment in institutions or community-based settings. Given that community-based supervision may reduce reoffending and promote prosocial attitudes and behaviors, and that continued substance abuse treatment may be needed to prevent longer term relapses, integrating substance abuse treatment into community-based services may realize greater benefits in reducing serious adolescent offending while providing more efficient and effective delivery of services.



Notes

1. OJJDP is sponsoring the Pathways to Desistance study in partnership with the National Institute of Justice, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the William T. Grant Foundation, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the William Penn Foundation, the National Institute on Drug Abuse (Grant Number R01DA019697), the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency, and the Arizona State Governor's Justice Commission. Investigators for this study are Edward P. Mulvey, Ph.D. (University of Pittsburgh), Robert Brame, Ph.D. (University of North Carolina–Charlotte), Elizabeth Cauffman, Ph.D. (University of California–Irvine), Laurie Chassin, Ph.D. (Arizona State University), Sonia Cota-Robles, Ph.D. (Temple University), Jeffrey Fagan, Ph.D. (Columbia University), George Knight, Ph.D. (Arizona State University), Sandra Losoya, Ph.D. (Arizona State University), Alex Piquero, Ph.D. (Florida State University), Carol A. Schubert, M.P.H. (University of Pittsburgh), and Laurence Steinberg, Ph.D. (Temple University). The rationale for the study may be found in Mulvey et al., 2004, and the details of operations can be found in Schubert et al., 2004.

2. During their baseline interviews, 57 percent of the respondents reported that they had smoked marijuana in the previous 6 months, 40 percent had drunk alcohol during that time, and 27 percent had used cocaine, hallucinogens, or other drugs. Approximately 48 percent of the study participants had used multiple substances during the 6 months before the baseline interviews and, in each followup interview, about 28 to 30 percent reported using multiple substances in the previous 6 months. In addition, at the time of the baseline interview, 37 percent of male study participants and 35 percent of female participants were diagnosed with a substance use disorder in the previous year, three to four times the rate in the general youth population (Mulvey, Schubert, and Chassin, 2010).

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