

Programs that Promote Positive Development Can Help Young Offenders Grow Up and Out of Crime.

SUMMARY

Serious juvenile offenders, like other young people, have the potential for growth and change. Multiple studies have shown that maturity and reduced offending are closely intertwined. The question is, what constitutes “maturity” and how can we best support it?

Analyses of the Pathways study confirm that, while part of the equation involves natural changes in thinking, such as impulse control and considering the consequences of one’s actions, other factors also play important roles. It appears that programs that promote an examination of one’s thoughts and actions (such as cognitive behavioral therapy), combined with opportunities to practice and internalize that thinking (such as employment), can help young offenders mature and significantly reduce their offending.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

Reducing offending means not simply restricting opportunities to offend but expanding opportunities to grow. Juvenile justice systems should work to build programs that promote positive development in serious adolescent offenders.

Serious juvenile offenders, like their non-offending counterparts, vary in their patterns of development.

The transition from adolescence into early adulthood—between the ages of 14 and 25—is a period of significant psychosocial development. During this time young people generally move out of their childhood home, begin to work, and form new social attachments. They also develop more mature patterns of thinking, reasoning, and decision-making. With these changes, they acquire the kinds of skills and relationships they will draw on to meet the demands of adult life.

While the kinds of changes are similar for virtually all youth, they do not occur in a uniform sequence or on a specific schedule. This variability is as true for juvenile offenders (including serious juvenile offenders) as it is for adolescents not in the justice system. Results from the Pathways study and other investigations indicate considerable variability among justice-involved youth in areas such as substance use, romantic relationships, employment histories, parenting experiences, and other aspects of entering early adulthood.

Unfortunately, the variability among serious offenders—and their potential for growth and change—can be overlooked when people

focus on their offending. The small percentage of youth in the juvenile justice system who commit serious crimes¹ are often viewed as a homogeneous group, destined for poor outcomes. This leads to uniform policies based solely on legal factors or the current offense, with no consideration of social and developmental factors.

Most serious juvenile offenders are not on the road to persistent adult offending.

One thing that is known about juvenile offenders is that their offending patterns change as they grow up. As a group, serious offenders reduce their offending over time. However, as with other aspects of development, they do not reduce their criminal involvement in lockstep; different subgroups change at very different rates and ages.

Work from the Pathways study of serious adolescent offenders has shown several different

paths, whether the offending is measured by official arrest records (figure 1) or self-reports (figure 2).

Multiple components of maturity are related to reduced offending.

The juvenile justice system focuses a great deal of attention on reducing recidivism—but that is not the only way to frame success. It is also useful to look at positive behavior and what factors—what particular aspects of “growing up”—promote a pro-social life in young offenders.

Many theories have been offered to explain why individuals change in particular ways throughout late adolescence and early adulthood—and why, in particular, they might reduce their criminal involvement and become well-functioning adults. The most prominent theories conclude that developmental change in general is the result of multiple individual, social, and contextual factors. It is reasonable to think that this is also true for reductions in offending.

FIGURE 1: Arrest Trajectories for the Pathways Sample²

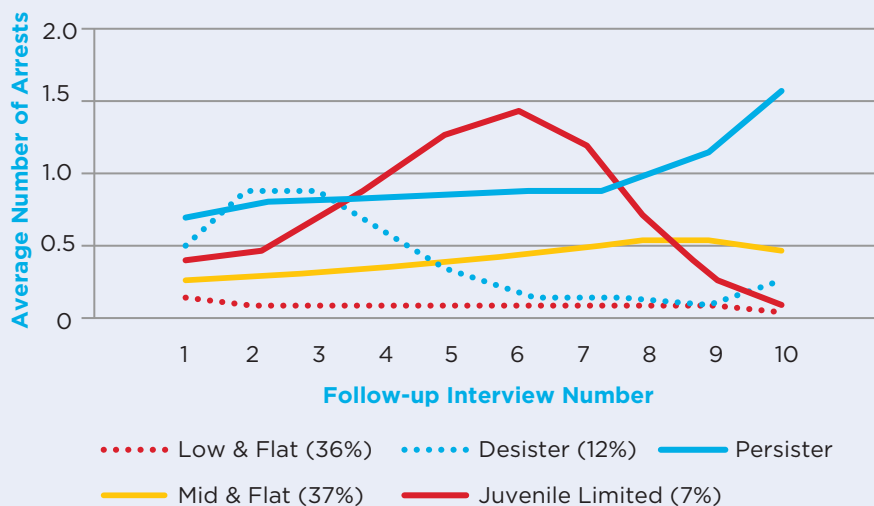
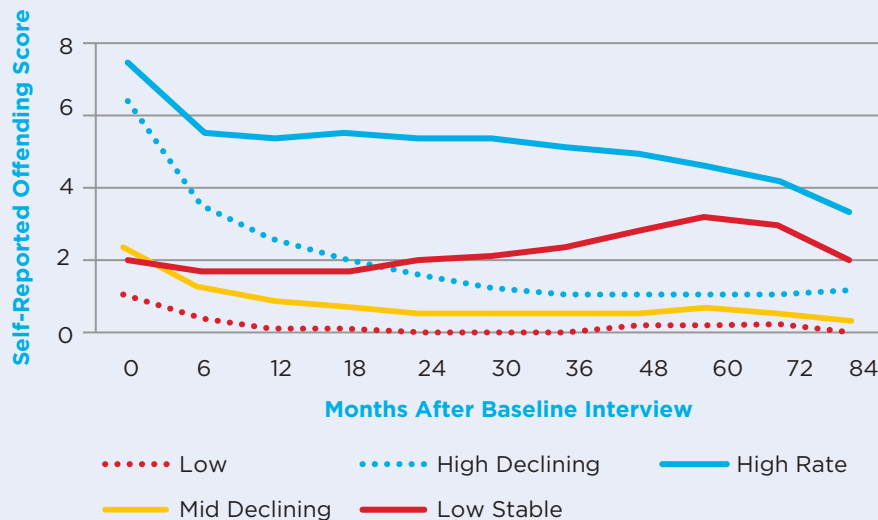


FIGURE 2: Time-Based Trajectories for Self-Reported Offending³



Several analyses from the Pathways study support this conclusion for serious juvenile offenders, and extend the findings discussed in a companion brief on adolescent development.⁴ While the findings do not show a clear cause-and-effect relationship between maturity and decreased offending, they strongly suggest that more mature thinking, influenced by multiple social factors, plays an influential role in desistance from crime and more positive behavior.

- In one set of analyses, investigators assessed whether changes over time in some areas of development explained the widely documented downward slope in the “age-crime curve”—the drop-off in crime during late adolescence and early adulthood.⁵ A long-held position in criminology is that this is solely a product of age, with no other sociological or psychological variables exerting a significant influence.⁶ The investigators in the current study found, to the contrary, that a number of factors are involved, and that each of them contributes

independently to reduced offending. Assessed separately, the contributions of these factors range from 3 percent for “procedural justice” (that is, how fair and legitimate the youth believes the justice system is) to 49 percent for “social learning” (the influence of peers and other elements of one’s social context). Changes in all the variables taken together explained 69 percent of the drop in offending. The conclusion is that multiple co-occurring developmental changes fuel much of the association between age and reduced offending.

- Another group of investigators identified 142 study participants who, despite committing a serious offense at the point of entry into the study, went on to be “system successes”—that is, they had no or only minimal involvement with the justice system (at most a single misdemeanor) in the seven-year follow-up period.⁷ The males from this group were compared to other male study participants who looked just like them on a variety of

characteristics at disposition. Over the subsequent seven years, the two groups differed in three significant ways: the “system success” individuals had developed more restraint, believed more in the legitimacy of the law, and grew more in overall maturity. These are all changes in how adolescents frame their social role in relation to others as they grow up. In addition, engagement with the world of legitimate work appeared to matter for the successful youth, who saw significant increases in earnings through legal means. (Both groups retained comparable, but generally low, levels of illegal earnings.) The conclusion here is that changes in maturity and attitudes, along with some movement into adult roles, are associated with breaking free of justice-system involvement.

- In a third set of analyses, investigators examined whether changes in psychosocial maturity differed in adolescents with different patterns of offending.⁸ They found that the serious adolescent offenders in the Pathways study matured the same way you would expect in any sample of adolescents going into young adulthood. The youth showed growth in each of six indicators of psychosocial maturity: impulse control, suppression of aggression, consideration of others, future orientation, personal responsibility, and resistance to peer influence. The rate of increase slowed but did not stop in early adulthood (age 22 and after). However, there were identifiable groups in the sample of offenders who matured more slowly or more quickly than others, and these different patterns of maturing were associated with different patterns of offending: youth whose antisocial behavior persisted into early adulthood showed lower levels of psychosocial maturity in adolescence and slower development of maturity.

So how can policy and practice promote increased maturity of judgment and action?

Converging evidence from analyses of the Pathways study indicates that more mature thinking may be a key component in reduced criminal offending. But it is not a magic bullet; an adolescent’s social situation and opportunities for adult roles also are important to the process. Opportunities for positive behaviors promote more mature patterns of thinking, and these shifts in thinking, in turn, promote more positive social opportunities. This raises the important issue of how practices and policies can encourage this process and enhance positive development in serious adolescent offenders.

One approach with a good track record is cognitive behavioral therapy—programs that identify and rehearse constructive reactions to social situations.⁹ The Pathways evidence supports the idea that evidence-based programs of this type, done well, are likely to have a positive effect on serious adolescent offenders.

But changes in thinking are just the first step; those changes will only take hold as they are practiced and internalized. Adolescent offenders need opportunities to apply and test out their judgments. Therefore interventions should focus on refining, expanding, and applying mature thinking and judgments in social situations.

Integration into adult social roles provides the context for this kind of learning, allowing adolescents to gain adult capacities such as reasoning, responsibility, and job skills. But young offenders will get that experience only if the juvenile justice system builds programs for that purpose—programs that give young

people the opportunity to take on new roles and acquire adult capacities through supported experiences, as parents do for their children. This will require the system to establish community connections in multiple arenas—employment, education, culture—to strengthen opportunities for these youth.¹⁰

The bottom line: reducing offending means not simply restricting opportunities to offend but expanding opportunities to grow.

The broad message of the findings discussed here is that positive development, particularly maturity of judgment, is closely intertwined with reductions in offending: each strand affects the other, taking different twists and contours over time, and varying widely among individuals. There is variability in the sequence and rate at which serious adolescent offenders move into young adulthood, and in how they desist from crime. But consistently, criminal involvement falls off as positive transitions in world view and changes in social roles take hold.

The long view on ensuring public safety thus rests on promoting the processes of positive development.¹¹ The juvenile justice system must work with other sectors of society to equip serious adolescent offenders with capacities to think and act more maturely. With the help of directed experiences in the community, even serious offenders can grow up and out of crime.

FURTHER READING

[Focusing Juvenile Justice on Positive Youth Development.](#) Butts, Mayer, & Ruth. Chapin Hall Center for Children: Issue Brief #105. October, 2005.

[Reforming Juvenile Justice: A Developmental Approach.](#) National Research Council, Committee on Assessing Juvenile Justice Reform.

[Core Principles for Reducing Recidivism and Improving Other Outcomes for Youth in the Juvenile Justice System.](#) Seigle, Walsh, & Weber, Council of State Governments Justice Center, 2014.

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The Pathways to Desistance study is a multi-site, longitudinal study of serious adolescent offenders as they transition from adolescence into early adulthood. It is funded by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation in partnership with federal and state agencies and other foundations. For more information, contact Carol Schubert at schubertca@upmc.edu, or visit the Pathways website, www.pathwaysstudy.pitt.edu.

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Models for Change: Systems Reform in Juvenile Justice, launched in 2004, is a multi-state initiative working to guide and accelerate advances in juvenile justice, to make systems more fair, effective, rational, and developmentally appropriate.

The **Resource Center Partnership** is expanding the reach of the *Models for Change* initiative—its lessons, best practices, and knowledge built over a decade of work—to more local communities and states. The Partnership provides practitioners and policymakers with technical assistance, trainings, tools, and resources for juvenile justice reform.



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Various analyses of the Pathways study looked at this from different angles and came to similar conclusions: while maturity involves a number of natural, age-related changes in thinking, such as impulse control and considering the consequences of one’s actions, other factors, such as moving into adult roles, also play an important part. Moreover, some of these factors can be influenced by policy and practice. For example, it appears that programs that promote an examination of one’s thoughts and actions (such as cognitive behavioral therapy), combined with opportunities to practice and internalize that thinking (such as employment), can help young offenders mature and significantly reduce their offending.

In short, reducing offending means not simply restricting opportunities to offend but expanding opportunities to grow.

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