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IN MEMORIAM

Alison Vines, an analyst in the juvenile division of the Maricopa County Superior Court, passed away recently after a relatively brief illness. We, and many others, will miss her. Often, we encounter hard-working, dedicated individuals who make organizations successful by their positive approach to their work and to the people around them. Alison was the prototype of this type of individual; someone who quietly and daily made a difference. Alison was a tremendous supporter of the Pathways study from day one because she recognized the study's potential to fill critical gaps in our understanding of youthful offenders. While we appreciated her support and her efforts on behalf of the study, we were more gratified to have known her as a good person. We were blessed to know her unyielding devotion to raising her son, her infectious laughter, and her positive outlook. We offer our condolences to her family and friends.

Data Collection at a Glance

- 1,354 participants
- Over 21,556 interviews completed to date (subject, collateral and release interviews)
- All subjects have passed through their opportunity to complete the 48-month interview
- 37 subjects have died since the baseline (3%)
- 38 subjects have dropped out of the study since the baseline (3%)
- Subject retention rates for each time point (6-60-month) are averaging 91%
- As of the 48-month interview, 87% of the subjects have completed 6 or 7 of their six possible interviews
- Yearly collateral reports (for the first 3 years) are present for about 85% of subjects

PATHWAYS

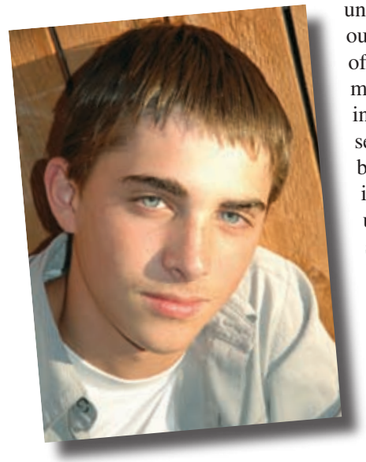
Research on Pathways to Desistance

WINTER 2008 VOLUME 12

Serious Adolescent Offenders Transition to Adulthood

Moving from adolescence to adulthood is a critical, and challenging, period for any young person. During this time, a young person learns to live independently and attempts to find a place in society. Issues arise regularly on a number of fronts. Where will I live? How will I make a living? Will I marry?

These transition years are especially daunting for youths with a history of involvement in serious crime. As a group, these youths face some higher and more dramatic hurdles in their path than those encountered by their non-offending counterparts. Becoming a young adult is hard enough in and of itself; being a serious adolescent offender and becoming a young adult means navigating an even more complicated and involved transition period.



In this article, we provide a snapshot of what the youth involved in the Pathways study face as they make the transition to adulthood, looking at some widely accepted benchmarks for this process. The information reflects experiences communicated by the participants at the time of the four-year follow-up interview or in the years leading up to that point. At the time of their initial interview, the Pathways study adolescents were about 16 years old; at the four year follow-up, they were, on average, 20.5 years old (ranging from 18 – 24.).

In some instances, we compare the situations of the Pathways adolescents to those reported for adolescents of the same age in two national samples: 1) the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (AddHealth, 2003) and 2) the 2000 Census (as reported in Casey Foundation, 2005). The AddHealth study is a nationally representative study of adolescents and we are specifically focusing on the data from 4,882 respondents between the ages of 18 and 26 who are, on average, 21.2 years old. The census data reports characteristics of the 27.1 million young adults age 18-24 (average age 20.5) represented in the 2000 US Census database. It is important to recognize that these samples are not necessarily proportional to the Pathways sample in terms of racial and socio-economic make-up, but they do provide a comparison group for a cursory view of how the Pathways participants fare in comparison to the experiences of the majority of youth of the same age in this country.

This information is useful for understanding the prevalence of various experiences that serious youthful offenders have encountered as they move toward adulthood. Understanding the areas in which these youth seem to either be on par with or behind other youth of the same age in the general population should give us some leads about the types of supports and/or services that might be most relevant for promoting successful adjustment.

School

Completing high school is a key step in the transition to adulthood. A high school diploma or equivalency is the springboard for later success in finding a job and earning a living wage. As might be expected, though, the percentage of Pathways youth who report graduating from high school or receiving a GED is much lower than that seen in more general populations. Only 58% of the Pathways sample report completing high school or a GED, versus 75% of same-aged young adults in the Census data, and 81% in the AddHealth sample. Not surprisingly, then, a small number of the Pathways adolescents go on to post-secondary education. About 12% enrolled in a trade, business school, community college or vocational school, and only about 6% went on to enroll in college. In contrast, 53% of the respondents in the AddHealth sample reported being enrolled in college. If education is a critical gate to success, these adolescents are being left behind at the starting line.

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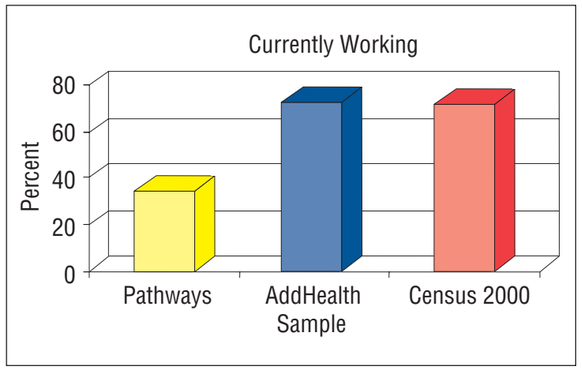
What keeps these adolescents from getting some educational capital is certainly an open question. Perhaps these youths have low aspirations or perceptions of educational opportunities beyond high school. Perhaps this regularity is related to disruptions in their schooling that accompany repeated out-of-home placements. Certainly, exploring ways to make aspirations a reality (i.e. identifying a career interest, finding financial support to attend school) or ensuring educational continuity would seem to be promising program goals. Currently, it is clear that most serious offenders are attempting to navigate the path to young adulthood without one of the key elements needed to start a career or even obtain a solid job.

Work

Financial independence (and self-respect) in adulthood relies, at least in part, on the ability to find stable and satisfying employment. This rarely happens in one fell swoop in young adulthood. Instead, as Arnett (2004) points out, emerging adults in their early twenties often hold a series of low-prestige, low-paying jobs as they look for a job that will be more satisfying and an expression of their identity.

In some ways, the Pathways adolescents fit this conventional mold. A large percentage of these adolescents (93%) reported having a job at some time (compared to 97% in the AddHealth sample). Where the Pathways youth differ is in their duration of employment. Of the Pathways youth with a job requiring at least 10 hours a week, only 65% reported having that job for more than nine weeks. In contrast, 97% of the AddHealth sample with a similar job report holding it for more than nine weeks. This probably produces the disparity in the samples reporting whether they are "currently working." Only about half as many of the Pathways sample say they currently have a job.



It seems that the serious offenders can get a job, but they cannot keep it for any extended period. This means that offending youth may spend a longer time than their counterparts taking short-term jobs as they attempt to sort out what kind of work they want to do long-term. This could also be a function of either a basic need to survive or a lack of commitment - keeping a job just until something better comes along or the work environment becomes too demanding. Whatever the mechanisms, it does seem clear that programs focused on finding a job for serious offending adolescents can seem to be successful if the only question is how many adolescents get employed. The important task, though, might be promoting skills and providing support to sustain employment.

Living Situation

Clearly, establishing an independent household is a benchmark of adulthood. Trends over the past few decades, however, indicate that youth are moving into independent living situations at a later age than in previous years. In the U.S. Census report, for example, almost half of the emerging adult sample (with an average age of 20.5) were living with their parents.

In the Pathways sample, the big difference is the number of emerging adults who are living in institutional care. Over the course of the four-year follow-up period (when most of these adolescents go from age 16 to 20), the Pathways participants spent, on average, 1/3 of this period in out-of-home placement. At the point of their 48-month follow-up interview (when they were, on average, 20.5 years old) about 30% of the Pathways sample report being in an institution. This means that serious adolescent offenders have a level of disruption in their living situation that is unparalleled in the development of adolescents in the general population. These youth must adjust to physical changes in environment, the rules and restrictions of multiple settings, and the emotional implications of disrupted and potentially wounded relationships.

Interestingly, though, when living in the community, the Pathways adolescents have living situations comparable to other samples of young adults their age. As seen in the table below, about half of these adolescents are living with their parents at about age 20. Given the predominance of youth who are actively living in a home with another adult, it seems reasonable for programs to involve parents where possible and work with both the youth and the parent to foster age-appropriate independent roles for the youth within the family context.

Table 1
Current Living Situation at 48-month Follow-up Interview

Percent of Community Locations	
Own place	29%
Parent's Home	51%
Another Person's Home	18%
Other community location	<1%

Marriage and Children

While the specific expectations and norms differ among social and ethnic groups, across all groups, emerging adulthood is generally the time when most youth are exploring the area of love relationships, and many will marry and have children. The Pathways adolescents do not seem much different in this regard. The vast majority (89%; 88% of males and 97% of females) of the Pathways participants report being involved in a love relationship at some point during the four-year follow-up period. At the point of the four-year follow-up interview, 84% of females in the Pathways sample were involved in a relationship, and only 61% of males were. Consistent with patterns in other groups, the male Pathways participants are generally involved with partners who are younger (less than one year younger in this group) while the female Pathways participants are involved with partners who are older (on average, five years older in this group). A small percentage of the Pathways sample (4%) reports being married at the time of their four-year follow-up interview, compared to 19% of the individuals of the same average age included in the 2000 census data.

Despite their young age, the Pathways adolescents often have responsibilities as parents and are dealing with violent relationships. Thirty-nine percent of the Pathways sample have had biological children or cared for a child in a parent role by the time of the four-year interview. In contrast, only 19% of the AddHealth participants of the same age (between 18 and 24) reported having a child. In addition, 80% of males and 20% of females in the Pathways sample reported being the perpetrator of domestic violence in a relationship within the same time period.

These patterns suggest serious adolescent offenders need a considerable amount of support in developing positive relationships and family roles. The romantic relationships during this period appear to be highly volatile. Also, youth in this sample are in parenting roles at a younger age than their non-offending counterparts. Promoting positive parenting practices would seem to be critical for a large proportion of offenders entering young adulthood.

The Risk of Everyday Life

Living with violence is a ubiquitous part of the everyday lives of these adolescents. This factor must certainly complicate the transition process to young adulthood, and present experiences that can alter or de-rail the path to adulthood and challenge even the most resilient full-fledged adults. At a most basic level, there is no guarantee of avoiding serious physical harm. Twenty-eight (2%) of the Pathways study participants died over this four-year period, and the majority of these deaths were the result of acts of violence. Also troubling is the fact that 62% of the Pathways youths report that someone close to them died in this four-year period. In the majority of cases, the person who died was a male friend (35%), or male relative (28%). Furthermore, 17.5% actually witnessed someone being killed and 3.5% report that they discovered a dead body. Surviving, yet alone flourishing, in an environment where life is so tenuous is an everyday challenge that has to wear on these adolescents.

Conclusion

While necessarily broad, the portrait presented here shows a group of young people who are facing considerable challenges along the path to adulthood. These adolescents are facing the tasks of young adulthood with less schooling, less stable employment, and more family responsibilities in unsafe environments. Yet they have hope. These youths report fairly high aspirations for work, their family and for ending legal problems (their average scores on a scale tapping aspirations is only slightly below the scale maximum), while recognizing some the difficulties in achieving these goals (their expectation to actually achieve their goals is rated only in the mid-range). We can't give up because these adolescents have not given up. If making the transition to adulthood successfully requires support in even the best of situations, then these adolescents need an extra boost to make that leap.

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