Give Adolescents the Time and Skills to Mature, and Most Offenders Will Stop.

SUMMARY

Pathways to Desistance, a major, long-term study of serious juvenile offenders, has shown that:

- Adolescents, including serious juvenile offenders, naturally mature—psychologically, socially, and cognitively—over time.
- The trend among serious adolescent offenders is toward reduced offending; relatively few consistently engage in serious adult crime.
- Even among serious offenders, there is a lot of variation in how, when, and at what rate individuals mature.
- Some people have wondered whether we can predict future offending based on the severity or frequency of offending during adolescence. The answer is, no. However, patterns of maturing do mirror patterns of future offending.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

Effective interventions should focus on helping offenders acquire the psychosocial competencies and skills—such as impulse control and thinking about consequences—that they need to live a law-abiding adult life.

Adolescents, including serious juvenile offenders, naturally mature over time.

Recent neuroscience research shows that the brain systems responsible for self-control continue to mature into a person's middle twenties. That raises two important questions: How is this brain maturation reflected in the growth of psychological maturity? And how might this relate to patterns of antisocial behavior?

Answers to these questions can be found in the major, multidisciplinary research project, Pathways to Desistance: A Longitudinal Study of Serious Adolescent Offenders. The project followed 1,354 serious juvenile offenders for seven years after their conviction, examining their psychosocial development as they made the transition into adulthood. The study looks at the factors that led these youths to commit serious crimes and to continue or stop offending. Its findings can provide important guidance for the design of interventions aimed at encouraging desistance, improving public safety, using resources wisely, and promoting positive adolescent development.

The data reveal that even among serious juvenile offenders, a lot of growing up—psychological, social, and cognitive—takes place between the ages of 14 and 22. The researchers are talking here not about social roles, such as getting a job or starting a family, but about internal development:

measurable factors that are essential markers of maturity, including impulse control, the ability to suppress aggression, consideration of others, thinking about the consequences of one's actions, personal responsibility, and resistance to peer influence. On all these measures, the juvenile offenders, like other adolescents, matured over time.

Very few juvenile offenders continue criminal behavior as adults.

The study showed that as they aged and matured, the majority of offenders also aged out of their antisocial behavior. This is exactly what one would expect given the maturation process described above. But the trajectories are not the same for everyone, and a small percentage—less than 10 percent—do become what the study calls "life-course persistent offenders." The researchers found five distinct patterns of growing out of antisocial behavior, as shown in figure 1:

- The group labeled *low*, about 35 percent, had low levels of offending throughout the study period. So even though they had committed a very serious crime (hence their inclusion in the study), their antisocial behavior did not continue.
- The *moderate* group, 16 percent, showed consistently moderate levels of offending.
- The *early desisters*, 30 percent, engaged in high levels of offending in early adolescence, but by age 15 those levels quickly and consistently declined.
- *Late desisters*, 9 percent, engaged in high levels of offending through mid-adolescence, peaking at about age 15, then showing a decline during the transition to adulthood.
- The final 9 percent were *persistent offenders*, with high levels of offending continuing from ages 14 to 25. The small size of this group has been confirmed by many other studies.

FIGURE 1: Five Trajectories of Antisocial Behavior

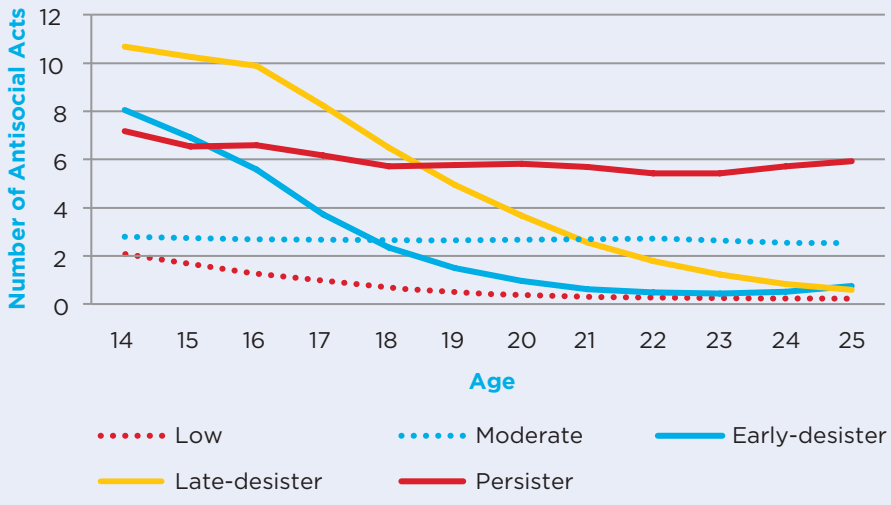
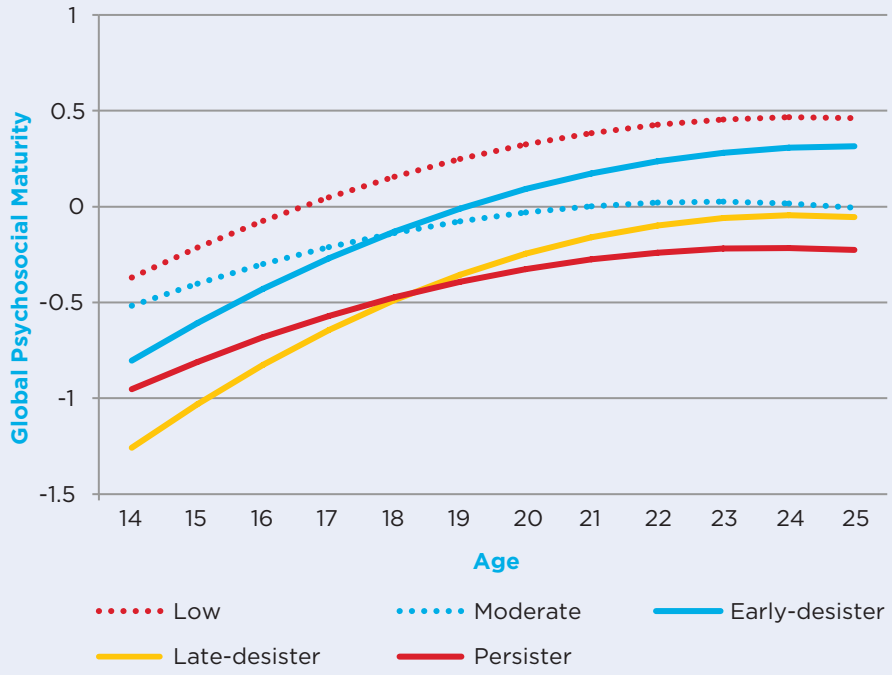


FIGURE 2: Trajectories of Antisocial Behavior and Global Psychosocial Maturity



It's important to note that even among those individuals who were high-frequency offenders at the beginning of the study, the majority had stopped these behaviors by the time they were 25.

Even among serious offenders, there is a lot of variation in how individuals mature.

The Pathways researchers were interested in the psychological processes that might underlie the differences among these groups—the "maturity factors" mentioned above, such as impulse control and resistance to peer influence. They found that individuals showed increases over time in all these aspects of maturity throughout the study, with the greatest increases coming during their mid-teens and early twenties.

However, the study also showed a lot of variation in this process. Serious offenders of a given age can differ significantly in their level of maturity. What's more, their *patterns* of maturing can differ: some mature faster than others, and some reach a greater degree of maturity than others. This raises the question: Could the different patterns in psychosocial development be linked to the different patterns of offending?

If we are going to try to predict future offending, we should look not to the severity or frequency of offending, but to the patterns of maturing.

The researchers found that the different groups of offenders did indeed have different patterns of maturing, both on the individual

factors and overall. As figure 2 illustrates, those who stopped their antisocial activity during adolescence showed significantly greater increases in psychosocial maturity than those who persisted into adulthood. This strongly suggests that desistance from antisocial activity is linked to the process of psychosocial maturation—the natural process of growing up.

In other words, what the study found is that neither the severity nor the frequency of adolescent offending does a good job of identifying who will desist. A better way is to track adolescents over time and see if their development is on course. Those who don't mature along the usual developmental timetable are the ones most likely to continue offending.

Interventions should help offenders acquire the psychosocial competencies and skills they need for a law-abiding adult life.

The inescapable and important conclusion of these findings is that the vast majority of juvenile offenders—even those who have committed serious crimes—will become mature, law-abiding adults simply as a consequence of growing up. It is important that involvement in the justice system not interfere with this process, but instead promote increased maturity.

This means that, to increase its impact, the juvenile justice system has to help offenders acquire the competencies and skills needed for a law-abiding life as an adult. These are not only the competencies we associate with school (learning math, for instance) or with vocational training (learning specific job skills), but basic psychological capacities, such as impulse control and thinking about the future consequences of one's actions. Recent work in neuroscience confirms that the brain systems responsible for self-control not only continue to mature in adolescence, but remain malleable during this period. Figuring out how to apply these discoveries with serious adolescent offenders—how to push the maturity process ahead positively—is the challenge to policymakers and practitioners.

FURTHER READING

"Trajectories of Antisocial Behavior and Psychosocial Maturity From Adolescence to Young Adulthood," a paper from the Pathways project by Kathryn C. Monahan, Laurence Steinberg, Elizabeth Cauffman, and Edward P. Mulvey.

Age of Opportunity: Lessons from the New Science of Adolescence, by Laurence Steinberg, a popular book that explains what happens in the brain during adolescence and how it relates to understanding juvenile crime.

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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Research on
PATHWAYS TO DESISTANCE

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A major, long-term study, Pathways to Desistance, looked at the factors that led youths to commit serious crimes and to continue or stop offending. Its findings, considered with other research, can provide important guidance for the design of interventions aimed at improving public safety and using juvenile justice resources more effectively to improve youth outcomes.

MAJOR FINDINGS

- Adolescents, including serious juvenile offenders, naturally mature—psychologically, socially, and cognitively—over time.
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IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

The links between maturing and stopping antisocial behavior suggest that interventions should help offenders acquire the psychosocial competencies and skills they need for a law-abiding adult life.

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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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