

Network on Adolescent Development and Juvenile Justice

Objectives

The juvenile justice system was founded nearly a century ago on what was then a revolutionary principle: Children are different from adults, and the justice system that deals with them should reflect these differences. The new system offered a means of providing individualized treatment and services to children in trouble. Beyond that, it raised the possibility of a society that would care for its children, give hope and support to families, and provide enlightened social control for its citizenry.

Today the juvenile justice system is under escalating attack. Critics on one side say the system is not tough enough on juvenile offenders; those on the other say it fails to consider children's individual needs and doesn't live up to its promise to rehabilitate. Rather than examining how to reform the juvenile justice system and coordinate its goals, the trend is to limit or dismantle it and, increasingly, to treat young offenders as adults.

As social scientists, legal experts, public officials, and the public at large debate the future of the juvenile justice system, it is essential that their discussions be fully and accurately informed, based on a sound understanding of child and adolescent development. That is the motivation behind the Foundation's Network on Adolescent Development and Juvenile Justice. The Network seeks to expand the base of knowledge about the origins, development, prevention, and treatment of juvenile crime and delinquency; to disseminate that knowledge to professionals and the public; to improve decision making in the current system; and to prepare the way for the next generation of reform in juvenile justice policy and practice.

Approach

The Network brings together a broad spectrum of scholars, policy experts, and practitioners in several areas of social science, psychology, and the law. In planning the Network, they examined the current state of knowledge on child and adolescent development and its practical applications in the juvenile justice system. Based on their findings, they designed a research program aimed at helping practitioners and policymakers make more informed, more effective decisions.

The Network has focused on three broad themes:

Competence. How do adolescents differ from adults in their capacity to understand the trial process, to assist their lawyers in their defense, and to make decisions about waiving their rights? What role is played by age and development, and what other factors might affect the competence of juveniles in the justice system?

Culpability. What is the actual and perceived culpability — the criminal responsibility or blameworthiness — of adolescents accused of involvement in illegal activity? Do the psychological and intellectual requirements for criminal culpability emerge along a predictable developmental path? How should this be taken into account in the justice system's response to juvenile crime?

Change. What is the psychological and behavioral trajectory of serious offenders as they move into, through, and out of the justice system? How can we assess an individual's risk for future offending, the likelihood of changing his or her behavior, or the odds that he or she will respond to treatment? And how do we then determine what *kind* of treatment is most likely to produce the desired change?

Progress and Plans

The Network has developed and sponsored a variety of research projects related to its broad themes, including a multi-site study of juveniles' competence to stand trial, a large-scale study of age differences in aspects of decision making and judgment relevant to assessments of criminal culpability, and a large-scale longitudinal study of serious juvenile offenders, where researchers are tracking patterns of recidivism and desistance across different types of interventions and sanctions. Another study compares the impact of juvenile and adult sanctions on the developmental, social, and behavioral outcomes of adolescents.

In other studies, Network researchers are looking at the impact of racial stereotypes and prejudice on juvenile justice practices; parental involvement in juvenile case proceedings; factors that influence children and youths' attitudes toward the law; juvenile psychopathy; and the economic costs and benefits of various juvenile justice policies.

The Network is working with other Foundation initiatives and grantees on issues of juvenile justice reform, and is developing a clinical assessment model for evaluating juveniles' competence to stand trial. It has published several edited volumes and commissioned a series of monographs on juvenile justice policy and practice.

Network Web page: www.mac-adoldev-juvjustice.org. For additional information, contact the Program Administrator, Program on Human and Community Development, (312) 726-8000 or 4answers@macfound.org. Also see our Web page: www.macfound.org.

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