

MacArthur Foundation

REPORT FINDS NO BENEFIT TO SENDING JUVENILE OFFENDERS TO EXPENSIVE INSTITUTIONAL PLACEMENTS

Washington, DC, December 9, 2009 – As many states face budget shortfalls, a new report on youth convicted of serious offenses finds that stays in expensive institutional placements produced no measurable results. Researchers found that even among youth committing serious (often violent) offenses, a large proportion turned away from serious offending after involvement with the court and were able to live successfully in their communities. The research also shows that institutional placement appears to have no advantage over probation in reducing rates of re-arrest or self-reported offending. The length of institutional stay also does not appear to make a difference.

The report is the first in a series from a long-term study of juvenile offenders. The Research on Pathways to Desistance Study – a multi-site, collaborative project that was launched in 2000 – is designed to identify and better understand factors that contribute to desistance, or ceasing to commit additional crimes. The research is supported by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation.

“The most surprising finding is that a youth’s future behavior did not correlate very well with the sanctions they received, suggesting that costly punitive measures may not be the best approach for keeping communities safe and rehabilitating young people in trouble with the law,” said principal investigator Edward Mulvey of the University of Pittsburgh today at a national conference of MacArthur’s Models for Change juvenile justice reform initiative. “Persisters’ and ‘desisters’ spent about the same amount of time in the same types of institutions. When you look at youth involved in a ‘low-level’ of offending, institutional placement actually raised the level of offending by a statistically significant amount.”

The Pathways study is following 1,354 juvenile offenders (ages 14 to 18), interviewing these adolescents as well as their family members and friends over a seven-year period after their conviction in court for a serious offense (a felony).

Significant findings to date include:

- Adolescents who become involved in serious crimes are not a particular “type” but a heterogeneous group, much like their non-offending peers. They differ substantially from one another on a number of relevant dimensions: parenting styles, social development, the timing of psychological development, mental health, attitudes toward the law, and the level of substance abuse. Seldom are these differences among them considered by courts, nor are they usually translated by service providers into different types of intervention.
- Nothing in the basic psychological or social characteristics of these adolescents strongly predicts which will go on to a high level of offending, even in the near future, and which will curtail their offending after court involvement.
- Longer stays in juvenile facilities do not appear to reduce offending; however, continued probation supervision and community-based services provided after a youth is released do make a difference, at least in the six months following release.

- Substance abuse is a major factor in continued criminal activity. Treating substance abuse can reduce subsequent offending.

“Policy makers often treat this group as if they were all the same and headed for the same life of adult crime. Actually, less than 10 percent continue illegal activity following court involvement. Closer consideration of individual and developmental differences by the courts and service providers could lead to more tailored, more effective services,” said Laurie Garduque, the Director of MacArthur’s juvenile justice grantmaking. “Our hope is that evidence about what works will inform policy changes to better serve youthful offenders and their families, while ensuring communities are kept safe.”

The Pathways to Desistance Study grew out of work by the MacArthur Research Network on Adolescent Development and Juvenile Justice, a ten-year, interdisciplinary project that provided research cited by the Supreme Court to ban the death penalty for juveniles under the age of 18. The study is supported through MacArthur’s Models for Change juvenile justice reform initiative, an effort to create successful and replicable models of juvenile justice reform, through targeted investments in key states. Models for Change seeks to accelerate progress toward a more effective, fair, and developmentally sound juvenile justice system that holds young people accountable for their actions, provides for their rehabilitation, protects them from harm, increases their life chances, and manages the risk they pose to themselves and to the public. The initiative is underway in Illinois, Pennsylvania, Louisiana, and Washington and, through action networks focusing on key issues, in California, Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, Kansas, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Jersey, North Carolina, Ohio, Texas, and Wisconsin.

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