

Arrested Development CONFINEMENT CAN NEGATIVELY AFFECT YOUTH MATURATION

POLICY UPDATE: DECEMBER 2013

While it is apparent to most people—especially parents—that adolescents think differently than adults, a growing body of research into brain development has confirmed the physiological underpinnings for this behavior. Studies of adolescent brain development have revealed that the part of a young person’s brain related to judgment is generally not fully developed until the early to mid-twenties.¹

Now, recent research funded by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation’s [Models for Change initiative](#) delves into the question of how incarceration affects the development of young people’s judgment and psychosocial maturity from mid-adolescence into early adulthood.² The study finds statistically significant, short-term declines in psychosocial maturity for youth incarcerated in a secure facility. This period of lower maturity level means that youth may be more impulsive and susceptible to negative peer influence upon release, placing them at higher risk for re-arrest.

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

The research was based on data from a seven-year, longitudinal study of 1,171 male adolescents aged 14 to 25 in two major metropolitan areas. The participants had been adjudicated of a felony offense, serious property crime, misdemeanor weapons offense, or a misdemeanor sexual assault. The proportion with drug law violations was capped at 15 percent.³

The study examined the effects of incarceration on psychosocial maturity. Psychosocial maturity includes temperance (the ability to curb impulsive and aggressive behavior), perspective (the ability to see things from multiple different points of view, including consideration of others and future orientation), and responsibility (the ability to function independently, including personal responsibility and resistance to peer influence). All of these measures were combined to create a measure of “global psychosocial maturity.” The theory behind the study was that adolescence is

a time when youth are developing judgment and maturity partly through questioning and testing boundaries and limits, and partly by learning appropriate coping mechanisms for problems, such as seeking social support. Since youth who are incarcerated are not able to practice many of these skills because they often must obey orders without questioning and are regulated by extensive and rigid rules, it was hypothesized that confinement would harm the maturation process of incarcerated youth.

RESEARCH FINDINGS – No Bang for our Buck

Placing Youth in Secure Facilities Slows Their Maturation

Although states spend millions of dollars to incarcerate youth each year, the study did not find that secure confinement helped youth to develop self-control or responsibility, as proponents of such facilities have claimed.⁴ Instead, researchers found that youth incarcerated in secure facilities experienced a significant slowing of gains in global psychosocial maturity, temperance, and responsibility for approximately a one year period.⁵

Negative Institutional Settings Harm Youth's Maturation

Whether youth were incarcerated in a secure facility or a residential treatment center, those confined in facilities with negative features had lower subsequent levels of global psychosocial maturity compared to youth who had not been incarcerated.⁶ (Negative features included perceived danger of the facility and degree of contact with anti-social peers.)⁷ The finding regarding negative features is consistent with the *Pathways to Desistance* study, which found that youth confined in institutions that treat them less harshly report less subsequent antisocial activity.⁸

Why Short Term Slowing of Maturation Matters

The teenage years are a period of high brain development and high risk for youth. During these years, youth are more susceptible to peer pressure, have more difficulty controlling their emotions, act more impulsively, and engage in more risk-seeking behavior. Research shows that most youth will age out of delinquent behavior as they mature.⁹ Consequently, in the interest of public safety, our justice policies should be oriented towards programs that increase and accelerate a young person's maturation, rather than retarding it. Moreover, youth with lower psychosocial maturity, even in the short term, may be more impulsive and susceptible to negative peer influence upon release. This places youth at higher risk for re-arrest, setting them up for even harsher sentences as their offense history grows, and creating a vicious circle in which youth do not get the help they need for positive development and thereby pose a greater risk to public safety.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

While further study is needed, these initial findings, coupled with research from other *Pathways to Desistance* studies, suggest the following:

- States should focus more on effective community-based services for youth, rather than secure confinement, which can harm a youth’s psychosocial maturity in the short-term, and may increase the rate of re-arrest.¹⁰
- States should also stay away from harsh treatment of confined youth—by slowing their developing maturity,¹¹ such treatment not only harms youth, but can have a negative effect on public safety as well, by making youth less able to act like responsible adults, and more likely to commit new offenses.¹²

¹ National Juvenile Justice Network, “Using Adolescent Brain Research to Inform Policy” (September 2012), citing Jay N. Giedd et al., “Brain Development During Childhood and Adolescence: A Longitudinal MRI Study,” *Nature Neuroscience* 2, no. 10 (1999): 861; Jay N. Giedd, “Structural Magnetic Resonance Imaging of the Adolescent Brain,” in *Adolescent Brain Development: Vulnerabilities and Opportunities*, ed. Ronald E. Dahl and Linda Patia Spear, *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, Vol. 1021 (2004); Nitin Gogtay et al., “Dynamic Mapping of Human Cortical Development During Childhood Through Early Adulthood,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science* 101 (2004): 8174; Arthur W. Toga, Paul M. Thompson, and Elizabeth R. Sowell, “Mapping Brain Maturation,” *Trends in Neurosciences* 29, no. 3 (March 2006):148-59; online publication, Feb. 10, 2006.

² The main ideas in this document are drawn from Juila Dmitrieva, Kathryn C. Monahan, Elizabeth Cauffman, and Laurence Steinberg, “Arrested Development: The Effects of Incarceration on the Development of Psychosocial Maturity,” *Development and Psychopathology* 24 (2012): 1073-1090. This study comes out of the *Pathways to Desistance* body of work, which is funded by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, U.S. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, National Institute of Justice, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, U.S. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, National Institute of Justice, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, William Penn Foundation, William T. Grant Foundation, Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency, Arizona Governor’s Justice Commission, and National Institute on Drug Abuse. The study grew out of the efforts of the MacArthur Research Network on Adolescent Development and Juvenile Justice. For more information visit www.modelsforchange.net and search for Pathways to Desistance or see details of the study provided at www.pathwaysstudy.pitt.edu.

³ Dmitrieva, et al., “Arrested Development, 1075.

⁴ Dmitrieva, et al., “Arrested Development, 1087. Note that another *Pathways to Desistance* study found that for youth maintaining low levels of antisocial behavior, institutional placement increased their level of antisocial

activity. E.P. Mulvey, et al., “Trajectories of Desistance and Continuity in Antisocial Behavior Following Court Adjudication among Serious Adolescent Offenders,” *Development and Psychopathology* (2010): 453-375.

⁵ For example, youth that were not incarcerated between the ages of 17 and 18 increased their global psychosocial maturity levels through natural maturation by .2 points while those who had spent 50 percent of their time in a secure facility only increased by .1 point and those that spent 100 percent of their time incarcerated only increased by .05 points. The detrimental effects were not sustained over time. Dmitrieva, et al., “Arrested Development,” 1083-84, 1086.

⁶ Note that confinement in secure facilities with negative features was also associated with lower levels of temperance and responsibility compared to not being incarcerated, though not perspective. Incarceration in residential treatment centers with negative features was associated with lower levels of temperance but not perspective or responsibility. Dmitrieva, et al., “Arrested Development, 1086.

⁷ Dmitrieva, et al., “Arrested Development,” 1078.

⁸ C.A. Schubert, et al., “Perceptions of Institutional Experience and Community Outcomes for Serious Adolescent Offenders,” *Criminal Justice & Behavior*, 39(1) (2012): 71-93.

⁹ Models for Change, “Research on Pathways to Desistance: December 2012 Update” (December 2012), <http://www.modelsforchange.net/publications/357>.

¹⁰ T. Loughran, et al., “Estimating a Dose-Response Relationship Between Length of Stay and Future Recidivism in Serious Juvenile Offenders,” *Criminology*, 47 (2009): 699-740.

¹¹ Dmitrieva, et al., “Arrested Development, 1086.

¹² Youth’s impressions of the institutions they were placed in is related to their anti-social behavior in the community once released and youth incarcerated in institutions that treated them less harshly reported less anti-social activity after release. C.A. Schubert, et al., “Perceptions of Institutional Experience and Community Outcomes for Serious Adolescent Offenders,” *Criminal Justice & Behavior*, 39(1) (2012); 71-93.