

# NATIONAL JUVENILE JUSTICE NETWORK

## Fact Sheet

### EMERGING FINDINGS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS FROM THE *PATHWAYS TO DESISTANCE* STUDY

SEPTEMBER 2012

The *Pathways to Desistance* study is a large, multi-site, collaborative project that follows over 1,300 youth ages 14-18 for seven years after their convictions. All youth who participated in the study were considered “serious offenders”; many had multiple prior court cases and had just received a conviction for a serious charge—almost exclusively felonies—including murder, robbery, aggravated assault, and sex offenses in either the juvenile or adult system.<sup>1</sup> This fact sheet provides recent findings and policy implications stemming from the research.

#### **Finding: Youth in trouble with the law vary considerably. Their future development or illegal behavior cannot be predicted based on their presenting offense.<sup>2</sup>**

---

- Youth who commit serious offenses vary considerably in patterns of offending, risk factors, and life situations.<sup>3</sup>
- Whether a youth gradually stops committing crimes, remains stable, or increases his or her level of offending is not directly related to his or her presenting offense.<sup>4</sup>

#### **Policy Implication:**

Policies about placement or program eligibility that are based on criteria related to a youth’s presenting offense are not an effective means of identifying risk, addressing recidivism, or encouraging positive youth development.<sup>5</sup>

#### **Finding: Substance abuse issues can significantly increase the risk of future arrests for youth; treatment reduces recidivism.<sup>6</sup>**

---

- A higher level of substance abuse increases youth offending significantly.<sup>7</sup>

- Substance abuse treatment, if it is of sufficient duration, has a significant positive effect for youth in trouble with the law, particularly if families are involved.<sup>8</sup>
- Substance abuse treatment services are not provided to most youth with a diagnosed need for them—especially in the community, where only 14 percent of youth with a diagnosis receive treatment, and receive an average of only one session every 50 days.<sup>9</sup>

***Policy Implication:***

Community service providers and juvenile systems should increase substance abuse services—in the community and within institutions—for youth who commit serious offenses. Services should be of adequate intensity and should involve family members.<sup>10</sup>

**Finding: Placing youth in an institution has no effect on their rate of re-arrest.<sup>11</sup>**

---

- If anything, placement in an institution may actually increase the rate of re-arrest.<sup>12</sup>
- There is no decrease in recidivism for youth placed in institutions for longer lengths of stay (three to thirteen months).<sup>13</sup>
- For youth who are maintaining low levels of antisocial behavior, institutional placement increases their level of antisocial activity.<sup>14</sup>

***Policy Implication:***

Juvenile justice systems should place youth who commit serious offenses in institutional settings less often—and for shorter durations. Such youth should instead receive an increased level of community-based services.<sup>15</sup>

**Finding: Youth who are provided with a more positive institutional experience have better outcomes.<sup>16</sup>**

---

- A higher level of institutional services (e.g., mental health, substance abuse treatment) and reentry planning significantly reduce the chance of a youth being involved in the justice system in the future.<sup>17</sup>
- Youth emerging from institutions that treat youth less harshly report participating in less antisocial activity.<sup>18</sup>
- What youth think of the environment of institutions in which they are placed is related to their anti-social behavior in the community after release, even after controlling for individual-level factors related to offending.<sup>19</sup>

***Policy Implication:***

States should promote procedures, policies, and assessment tools that regularly review whether justice-involved youth are receiving services in institutions that are matched to their needs. In addition, states should conduct periodic assessments of institutional environments from the perspective of youth placed in such institutions.<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> The research incorporates data collection of significant life events and extensive interviews with the youth, family members and friends at specific time points. Nearly 20 percent of the youth in the study were tried as adults. The research 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, 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](http://www.modelsforchange.net) and search for Pathways to Desistance or see details of the study provided at [www.pathwaysstudy.pitt.edu](http://www.pathwaysstudy.pitt.edu).

<sup>2</sup> K.C. Monahan, et al., “Trajectories of Antisocial Behavior and Psychosocial Maturity from Adolescence to Young Adulthood,” *Developmental Psychology*, 45(6), (2009): 1654-1668; E.P. Mulvey, et al., “Trajectories of Desistance and Continuity in Antisocial Behavior Following Court Adjudication Among Serious Adolescent Offenders,” *Development and Psychopathology*, 22, (2010): 453-475.

<sup>3</sup> K.C. Monahan, et al., “Trajectories of Antisocial Behavior” and E.P. Mulvey, et al., “Trajectories of Desistance.”

<sup>4</sup> E.P. Mulvey, et al., “Trajectories of Desistance” and K. Monahan, et al., “Does Time Matter?”

<sup>5</sup> E.P. Mulvey, “The Pathways to Desistance Study: Selected Findings and Policy Implications,” Presentation to the National Juvenile Justice Network, (July 25, 2012): 23. The policy implications included in this publication are based on those contained in Dr. Mulvey’s presentation to the National Juvenile Justice Network on July 25, 2012. Interpretation of the conclusions is the responsibility of the National Juvenile Justice Network.

<sup>6</sup> E.P. Mulvey, et al., “Substance Use and Offending in Serious Adolescent Offenders,” *Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention* (December 2010) and L. Chassin, et al., “Substance Use Treatment Outcomes in a Sample of Serious Juvenile Offenders,” *Journal of Substance Abuse Treatment*, 36(2), (2009): 183-194.

<sup>7</sup> E.P. Mulvey, et al., “Substance Use and Offending in Serious Adolescent Offenders,” C.A. Schubert, et al., “The Influence of Mental Health and Substance Use Problems and Criminogenic Risk on Outcomes in Serious Juvenile Offenders,” *The Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 50(9), (2011): 925-937, and L. Chassin, et al., “Substance Use Treatment Outcomes.”

<sup>8</sup> L. Chassin, et al., “Substance Use Treatment Outcomes.” Substance abuse programs should meet National Institute for Drug Abuse standards for enrollment time ([www.drugabuse.gov](http://www.drugabuse.gov)).

<sup>9</sup> E.P. Mulvey, “The Pathways to Desistance Study,” 29.

<sup>10</sup> E.P. Mulvey, “The Pathways to Desistance Study,” 31.

<sup>11</sup> 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.

<sup>12</sup> T. Loughran, et al., “Estimating a Dose-Response Relationship.”

<sup>13</sup> T. Loughran, et al., “Estimating a Dose-Response Relationship.”

---

<sup>14</sup> E.P. Mulvey, et al., “Trajectories of Desistance.”

<sup>15</sup> E.P. Mulvey, “The Pathways to Desistance Study,” 42.

<sup>16</sup> E. Mulvey, et al., “Service Use After Court Involvement in a Sample of Serious Adolescent Offenders,” *Children and Youth Services Review*, 29(4), (2007): 518-544 and C.A. Schubert, et al., “Perceptions of Institutional Experience and Community Outcomes for Serious Adolescent Offenders,” *Criminal Justice & Behavior*, 39(1), (2012): 71-93.

<sup>17</sup> C.A. Schubert, et al., “Perceptions of Institutional Experience.”

<sup>18</sup> C.A. Schubert, et al., “Perceptions of Institutional Experience.”

<sup>19</sup> C.A. Schubert, et al., “Perceptions of Institutional Experience.”

<sup>20</sup> E.P. Mulvey, “The Pathways to Desistance Study,” 50.