

Negative Effects of Imprisonment Follow Juvenile Offenders Into Adulthood

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Many youngsters in the U.S. juvenile justice system are already at a disadvantage. Now recent findings published in the journal *JAMA Pediatrics* show that most delinquent youth achieve few positive milestones in their lives in the years after their detention, especially Hispanic and African-American boys, [Reuters reports](#).

For the study, researchers followed nearly 1,200 boys and girls of all races for a period of 12 years after their detention in Chicago's Cook County Juvenile Temporary Detention Center. Scientists looked for positive outcomes in eight areas of these children's lives as they transitioned into adulthood: educational success, residential independence, gainful employment, distance from criminal activity, mental health, abstention from substance abuse, interpersonal functioning and parental responsibility.

At the end of the trial, results showed that only 22 percent of boys and 55 percent of girls attained more than half of these milestones. Minority boys were far more likely to fall into the worst outcome classes, with only 29 percent of Hispanic males and 19 percent of African-American men achieving more than half of the outcomes. (In comparison, 46 percent of non-Hispanic young white males secured the same goals). Results for girls did not differ by race or ethnicity.

In addition, findings showed that 24 percent of former delinquent boys were unlikely to have any positive outcomes in any area; 28 percent were incarcerated; 21 percent were living independently but struggling; and 6 percent were struggling family men. Only 21 percent of adolescent males who emerged from the youth detention system accomplished successful outcomes in nearly all categories of prosperity and well-being.

Among teen girls in the study, more than half were stay-at-home mothers; 14.4 percent were considered "unstable mothers" who noted positive outcomes only in their parenting responsibility. Ten percent of the young women said they were substance-free but struggling, and only 16 percent of girls followed showed positive outcomes in every area of focus except interpersonal functioning.

To address these dire outcomes, researchers and other social scientists suggested that

communities expand services for previously incarcerated young people and institute supportive policies to help them overcome barriers to employment and education.

“At the very least, we should redesign the juvenile system so that it does not exacerbate existing inequalities,” said Robert J. Sampson, PhD, professor of social sciences at Harvard University, who wrote an editorial about this report. “Because juvenile detention has durable consequences for later development and because today’s children and adolescents are tomorrow’s parents, there is urgency to breaking the stigma of a criminal record and the associated intergenerational cycle of compounded adversity.”

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