



ISSUE BRIEF

Using research to build better public policy for families

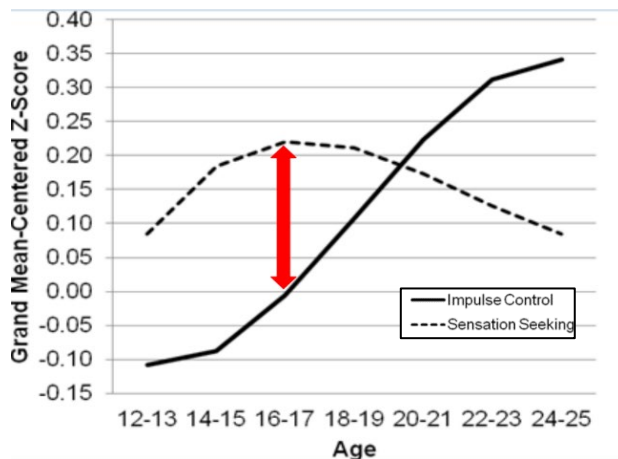
Research on Adolescent Development, Behavioral Health, and Criminal Offending: Why Does It Matter for Juvenile Justice Policy?

The juvenile justice system has multiple goals: ensure public safety, reduce delinquency, and rehabilitate youth. Recent research has increased our understanding of adolescent development, which has translated into less harsh court decisions and legislation to improve juvenile justice practice. Today, state policymakers are looking to improve their juvenile justice systems to achieve better outcomes for youth and society at lower costs.

How do the brains and behaviors of adolescents differ from adults?

Neuroscientific research (e.g., brain scans) and behavioral research (e.g., surveys and lab tasks) agree that adolescents differ from adults in how they make decisions. The brain is still developing into the mid-20s, especially the frontal lobe which is associated with executive functioning (e.g., reasoning, impulse control) and is the last area to mature. As a result, the gap between impulse control and sensation seeking is greatest during adolescence. This explains why some youth struggle to self-regulate in emotionally charged situations. They are more likely to make riskier decisions with peers and are less likely to consider long-term consequences. These characteristics show up in all areas of adolescents' lives, not only during criminal activity.

Gap in sensation seeking and impulse control during adolescence



Do youth offenders commit more or less crime as they get older?

Adolescent offenders naturally commit less or no crime as they mature, even without interventions. When they do commit crimes, they are less serious. This phenomenon is called “desistance” and has been observed for serious offenders, low-risk offenders, and those in between.

Does placement in a correctional facility reduce future offending?

Placing youth in secure facilities for any length of time does little, if anything, to reduce future offending. Institutional stays provide some benefits to some youth, often because of the services these facilities provide. Many of these services could be offered in the community. However, research indicates that too few youth with behavioral health needs (e.g., mental health conditions or substance use disorders) receive community-based services.

Is there a link between behavioral health and youth offending?

Youth offenders have higher rates of behavioral health conditions compared to the general youth population. However, mental health issues rarely cause crime, although they can interfere with rehabilitation. In contrast, substance use disorders are highly influential on criminal behavior but are rarely addressed adequately. Thus, mental health services should be integrated into wraparound services that treat risk factors (e.g., substance use disorders) and support other needs (e.g., job training, education).

How can policymakers support evidence-based juvenile justice programming?

Juvenile justice reform requires systems-wide changes that ensure the *right youth* receive the *right services* at the *right time*. To accomplish this, state policymakers could:

- **Divert low-risk youth to community-based, wraparound services** in lieu of more expensive correctional placement to support youth as they naturally desist from crime.
- **Support therapeutic approaches** (e.g., cognitive behavioral therapy, mentoring, family therapy) that help change youth's behavior and are shown to be more effective than external control methods (e.g., surveillance, deterrence).
- **Use risk and needs assessments** to best match youth with developmentally appropriate services.
- **Implement well-developed data systems** that track youth characteristics, services, and outcomes.
- **Recognize families as a key component** of any treatment plan.
- **Invest resources strategically**. Not all youth will need the same level or type of intervention. Research shows that intensive interventions should be reserved for high-risk offenders.

Establishing developmentally appropriate juvenile justice interventions is not only fiscally responsible but also but targets the root causes of adolescent offending. State policymakers can look to communities, families, and youth to develop evidence-based intervention programs. ●



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Edward Mulvey was one of three speakers at the 38th Wisconsin Family Impact Seminar, “Strategies to Divert Adolescents with Behavioral Health Needs from the Juvenile Justice System.” He is a Professor of Psychiatry and the Director of the Law and Psychiatry Program at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine. This issue brief was written by Family Impact Seminar Project Assistant Genevieve Caffrey and summarizes Professor Mulvey's seminar presentation and briefing report chapter, which can be downloaded from wisfamilyimpact.org/fis38/.