

# REENTRY OF YOUNG OFFENDERS FROM THE JUSTICE SYSTEM:

## A Developmental Perspective

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*This article presents a developmental perspective on the reentry of young offenders into the community. We begin with a discussion of the psychosocial tasks of late adolescence. Next, we discuss contextual influences on the successful negotiation of these psychosocial tasks. Third, we examine whether and to what extent the contexts to which young offenders are exposed in the justice system are likely to facilitate normative psychosocial development. Finally, we argue that the psychosocial development of youthful offenders is disrupted, or “arrested,” by their experiences within the justice system. Interventions designed to facilitate the successful reentry of young offenders into the community must be informed by what we know about healthy psychosocial development in late adolescence.*

**Keywords:** *youth reentry; community reintegration; youth incarceration*

Historically, professionals have advertised two dismal findings about young offenders reentering the community from the justice system—that nothing works (i.e., youthful offenders cannot be rehabilitated) (e.g., Martinson, 1974) and that there are no success stories (i.e., delinquents are destined for failure) (e.g., Farrington, Gallagher, Morley, St. Ledger, & West, 1988). Delinquents are forecasted to show poor adult outcomes (e.g., unemployment, welfare dependence, mental health problems), drain millions of dollars from social services agencies, and pass their legacy of problems to the next generation of teenagers. Indeed, it is well established that young offenders show poor adjustment as young adults, precisely during the years when most people gain the level of education and training that serve as the foundation for their future achievements (William T. Grant Foundation Commission on Work, Family and Citizenship, 1988).

This article tries to shed light on three important questions about the reentry of young offenders (those between the ages of 16 and 24) to the community from the juvenile or adult justice system: (a) why these youth face great challenges during this process; (b) why certain individuals achieve positive turning points in early adulthood and others do not; and (c) how programming in the justice system might increase the number of adult success stories. Framing this discussion is the very important and difficult mission of the justice

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system—that of deterring crime while balancing the interests of public safety and the needs of individual adolescents.

### **Adolescent Offenders: Superpredators or Troubled Teens?**

The United States juvenile justice system processes more than 2.5 million juvenile arrests over the course of a year and makes decisions about nearly 5,000 delinquency cases every day. According to these statistics, the system affects the lives of between 8% and 10% of all American youths between the ages of 10 and 17, a figure that has almost quadrupled within the past few decades (Puzzanchera, Stahl, et al., 2002). In addition to the large number of young people in the juvenile justice system are a substantial number of late adolescents and young adults in the criminal justice system. More than one fifth of individuals in state or federal prisons and jails are between the ages of 18 and 24 (Beck, Karberg, & Harrison, 2002), and many of these individuals will have spent some portion of their adolescent years in incarceration.

Usually, the public perception of youthful offending focuses on the criminal and sometimes callous side of young offenders—that they account for one in every five arrests in the United States, including 16% of violence-related and 32% of property-related crimes (Snyder, 2002), and cause substantial economic, physical, and emotional hardships for their victims, the families of their victims (as well as their own families), and the larger community. The most damaging depictions of young offenders as *superpredators* or psychopaths-in-training emerged in the mid-1990s (McCollum, 1996) following a period when youth violence in this country was at its highest in contemporary times. Such images caused citizens to fear for their safety and policy makers to get “tough on crime,” the idea being that punitive, no-nonsense responses (e.g., incarceration) would keep dangerous youths off the streets, prevent them from reoffending, and ultimately, preserve public safety.

There is a less frightening, but equally worrisome, depiction of young offenders that is usually not advertised to the public, however. It is the portrait of youth whose development is marked by the accumulation of disadvantage (Sampson & Laub, 1997) and whose considerable problems suggest that they are more in need of treatment than punishment. The image highlights the troubled aspects of these young offenders’ lives—that they often struggle with multiple problems at home, school, and in their communities prior to their first contact with the court and that they often lack the individual, family, or neighborhood resources to improve their situations. It is well established that most young offenders evince some combination of the following problems: poor school performance (e.g., truancy, low grades), mental health problems (e.g., substance abuse, depression), unstable and unsupportive family relationships, poverty- and crime-ridden communities, delinquent peer influences, and the absence of positive role models (Hawkins et al., 1998). We also know that ethnic minority youth, particularly Black males, are overrepresented at every stage of the justice system process and disproportionately afflicted with problems associated with court involvement, especially at the deep end. For example, Black and Hispanic youth make up about 15% and 16% of the general juvenile population, respectively, yet account for about 45% and 20%, respectively, of the near 109,000 adolescents who, on any given day, are in residential placement within the juvenile justice system. In contrast, White teenagers account for about 80% of the general youth population

but only 40% of adolescents in residential facilities (Puzzanchera, Kang, et al., 2002; Sickmund, 2000, 2002; Snyder, 1999).

### **Adult Outcomes for Adolescents in the Justice System**

Despite its putatively rehabilitative aims, it is all too often the case that young offenders finish their time with the justice system and move into the adult world with just as many, if not more, problems than when they first entered. It is well established that, as a group, delinquent youth show poor adjustment as adults and have trouble achieving traditional markers of adult success. In particular, they are notorious for experiencing educational failure and having problems securing later employment. According to one study, only 12% of formerly incarcerated adolescents (74% less than the national average) received their high school diploma or General Equivalency Degree (GED) as young adults (Habermann & Quinn, 1986; National Center for Education Statistics, 2001). This finding has significant implications because educational attainment is so strongly linked to both employment and earnings. It is not surprising that incarcerated adolescents have a hard time finding employment as adults, and their contact with the justice system has lasting adverse effects on their legal earnings (Fagan & Freeman, 1999; Freeman, 1992; Ward & Tittle, 1993; Wolfgang, Thornberry, & Figlio, 1987).

Notably, young offenders show worrisome adult outcomes even when compared to other vulnerable groups. The most discouraging comparisons are in the domains of educational attainment and employment. In a recent study of teenagers “on the outs”—a term that young offenders use to describe their transition from residential facilities back to the community—only about 30% of young adults were engaged in either school or work 12 months after their release (Bullis et al., 2002). The authors contrasted this statistic with engagement levels of 65% for adolescents exiting programs for emotional disturbances and 75% for those leaving special education programs. That nearly 70% of court-involved youth were idle, that is, not attending school or working (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2002), 12 months after they left residential facilities is especially disconcerting given that only 8.8% of teenagers and young adults in this country share this vulnerable predicament, 14.3%, 14.2%, and 7.7%, respectively, of Black, Hispanic, and White individuals (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 1998).

### **Being an Adult Versus Becoming an Adult: The Importance of Psychological Development for Making a Successful Transition to Adulthood**

In American society, adulthood is typically defined by status markers, like the accomplishments people achieve (e.g., high school diploma, job), the problems they have (e.g., arrests, mental health disorders), and the roles they fill (e.g., parent, spouse). There is reason to believe, however, that adolescents need to reach some level of psychosocial preparedness to successfully take on these adult roles and responsibilities. Indeed, in their seminal studies of delinquent youth, Gleuck and Gleuck (1974) found that it was not the achievement of any particular age or event but rather the achievement of “adequate maturation” that helped individuals change their deviant ways and adopt adult-like responsibilities. Accordingly, if we want to improve adult outcomes for delinquent youth, we need to understand not only what characterizes successful ex-offenders with respect to

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their roles and activities (e.g., employed, drug-free), or in terms of the social bonds that help them to desist from delinquent activity (e.g., having a supportive relationship with a spouse), but also the factors that underlie these “status” outcomes (National Research Council, 1993). In other words, we need to understand the processes that help young offenders become healthy and productive adults.

What is sorely missing from our understanding of delinquent youths’ transition to adulthood is a focus on psychological development during adolescence, specifically, a focus on how youths develop a level of maturity that helps them to create and take advantage of healthy turning points in their lives. In this article, we argue that this maturation process reflects the development of psychosocial capacities that help adolescents make a successful transition to adulthood. We consider these capacities to be a specific and understudied component of human capital, “psychosocial capital,” if you will, because they provide resources for adolescents and young adults to create and take advantage of positive life experiences. Three principles serve to guide our discussion: (a) that important psychosocial capacities develop during late adolescence that permit the successful transition into adult roles and responsibilities (see Steinberg, 2002); (b) that the development of psychosocial capacities is greatly influenced by the context in which it takes place (e.g., family, peer group) (see Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998); and (c) that by facilitating the psychosocial development of young offenders, justice system practitioners and policy makers can improve the odds that delinquent youth will go on to become healthy and productive adults.

#### **Psychosocial Capacities That Promote the Development of Successful Adults**

During late adolescence, young people are expected to take on more mature roles and responsibilities and figure out how to become healthy and responsible members of society. Adult outcomes depend heavily on what happens during these years because the experiences of adolescence lay the foundation for what individuals will be able to accomplish in the next stage of their lives. Making a successful transition from the dependency of adolescence to the self-sufficiency of adulthood is a process that requires the coordination of many skills. These capacities are epitomized in a concept called psychosocial maturity (Greenberger, 1984) and require development across three important domains: mastery and competence, interpersonal relationships and social functioning, and self-definition and self-governance (see Steinberg, 2002). To achieve sufficient psychosocial maturity and, along with it, the abilities to function as independent and productive adults, youths in contemporary industrialized society need to complete a series of developmental tasks in each of these three areas. The time during which these tasks need to be successfully completed is bound by the ages of 16 and 24, a transitional period that spans the years of late adolescence and early adulthood.

It is important to describe these developmental tasks in some detail in order to ask whether and in what ways experiences within the justice system can hinder successful psychosocial development. With regard to mastery and competence, by the end of the transitional period, mature individuals are expected to have developed the knowledge and skills necessary to understand, participate in, and enjoy society’s activities of production, leisure, and culture. They are expected to have achieved levels of education and vocational training so that they can learn to function as productive members of society. With regard to interpersonal relationships and social functioning, by the end of the transition, mature

individuals are expected to have the social skills necessary to interact appropriately with others and be able to establish and maintain intimate relationships that are satisfying to themselves and their partners. They are expected to function cooperatively and collaboratively in groups and feel, as well as exercise responsibility, toward the larger community in which they live. And with regard to self-definition and self-governance, by the time they enter their mid-20s, mature individuals are expected to have developed a positive sense of their own worth as individuals and the capacity to behave responsibly and morally in the absence of externally imposed supervision. They are expected to be independent and know how to set and achieve personal goals that are meaningful to them (see, e.g., Greenberger & Sorensen, 1974). Although it is not expected that these tasks are completed by the end of adolescence (Valde, 1996; Whitbourne & Tesch, 1985), it is expected that adolescents make significant headway in each of the three domains before they move into their early adult years (Erikson, 1959/1980) (see Appendix).

In general, researchers have found that people who show high versus low levels of psychosocial maturity (e.g., individuals who relate well to others, are able to secure or keep a job, successfully manage their day-to-day lives without an adult to oversee their actions, etc.) make more socially responsible decisions and show healthier outcomes as young adults (Greenberger, 1982; Steinberg & Cauffman, 1996). It is reasonable to assume that psychosocially mature individuals are successful during this transition precisely because they are prepared to handle the roles and responsibilities that accompany adulthood—roles and responsibilities that, in contemporary society, require interpersonal skills, instrumental competence, and responsible autonomy. Mature individuals have presumably developed the ability to manage their environment in a way that they can create opportunities that are consistent with their personal goals (e.g., because they possess the level of competence needed to get the job that they want) and also take advantage of the opportunities (e.g., because they possess the level of responsibility needed to maintain the job).

### **The Role of Context in Facilitating Psychosocial Development**

It is well established that the successful completion of the developmental tasks of late adolescence, and the achievement of psychosocial maturity, results from reciprocal interactions between individuals and their social environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). The different settings and activities in which adolescents participate (e.g., family, peer group, school, workplace, and for many delinquent youth, correctional facilities) can be seen as learning environments that provide “opportunity structures” for development (Larson & Verma, 1999). To the extent that they offer adequate support, opportunities, and resources for personal growth (i.e., developmentally appropriate experiences), social settings play a critical role in facilitating youths’ psychosocial development (see Appendix).

No single context has received as much concerted research attention as the family (see Collins & Laursen, 2004, for a review). A large body of research suggests that caring, committed, and supportive parents or guardians—those who are both responsive and demanding (a combination known as “authoritative” parenting)—provide a mix of structure and freedom that facilitates adolescents’ healthy psychosocial development and their transition to adulthood (Baumrind, 1991; Grotevant, 1998; Steinberg, Elmen, & Mounts, 1989).

As adolescents explore their social settings and spend more time away from their parents, peer influences play an increasingly important role in youths' psychosocial development (Brown, 2004). Relationships with prosocial peers, in particular, are important in three different but interrelated respects. First, the normative pressures in prosocial peer groups lead adolescents toward adult-approved activities and deter them from antisocial behavior. Second, social support in prosocial peer groups accentuates the beneficial effect of social support at home and compensates for family relationships that are not sufficiently supportive. Finally, the quality of intimate friendships with prosocial peers contributes to adolescents' mental health and adjustment in its own right.

Outside of the family and peer settings, characteristics of broader contexts like the school, workplace, and neighborhood have significant effects on youths' psychosocial development and, ultimately, their successful transition into adult roles and responsibilities (Graber, Brooks-Gunn, & Petersen, 1996). More specifically, each of these contexts provides a wealth of activities and social interactions that can promote adolescents' development in the areas of competence, self-governance, and interpersonal functioning (see Larson, 2000; National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2002). In addition to fostering academic skills, the school setting gives youths opportunities to forge relationships with positive role models (e.g., teachers), improve their interpersonal skills with peers, and participate in different leadership and extracurricular activities (e.g., athletic teams, student council) (see Eccles & Templeton, 2002). The work setting, while providing vocational skills, can also provide youths opportunities to establish a path to financial independence, learn about expectations that society has for adults, and practice exercising responsible behavior (e.g., showing up for work on time) (Greenberger & Steinberg, 1986; Mortimer, Finch, Ryu, Shanahan, et al., 1996). The neighborhood setting, while offering job opportunities, can also provide adolescents resources like youth groups and other community programs in which adolescents can develop social competence, prosocial peer networks, and civic commitment (see Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2004, for a review). Indeed, research has shown that participation in structured and goal-oriented extracurricular activities, work experiences, and neighborhood programs is related to positive adolescent outcomes like low levels of problem behaviors, high degrees of academic success, and high levels of psychosocial maturity (see National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2002). Researchers have found that these healthy outcomes are related not only to the skills that adolescents develop through the activities but also to the social capital that these youths accrue by establishing relationships with prosocial peers and adults (McLaughlin, 2000).

Ideally, the additive and interactive influences of the family, peer group, school, workplace, and neighborhood contexts facilitate healthy psychosocial development and prepare adolescents to make a successful transition to adulthood. It is a process that, under the best of circumstances, is promoted by the support and protection of adults, a sense of purposefulness about the future, and the freedom to explore possible life directions in the realms of family, education, work, love, and friendship (Arnett, 2000; Steinberg, 2002). With the gradual development of independence, responsibility, and interpersonal and instrumental competence, adolescents can take advantage of positive opportunities that are presented to them and, it is hoped, create new ones that will help them to become healthy and productive adults.

### **Does the Justice System Facilitate a Healthy Transition to Adulthood?**

The notion that the justice system should create an environment that facilitates young offenders' psychosocial development is easier said than done. Although the juvenile justice system was originally established with the ideal of promoting the development of troubled youth, its current mission has to uphold two potentially contradictory functions: rehabilitation, an aim that inherently strives to facilitate psychosocial development and adolescents' successful transition to adulthood, and punishment, an aim that does not and that, in extreme form, may actually impede these processes. It is this conflict between social control (exacting punishment in the best interest of public safety) and social welfare (providing treatment in the best interest of individual youths' needs) that frames service delivery in the justice system and that can, ultimately, constrain efforts to facilitate young offenders' successful transition to adulthood. This challenge is even greater with regard to young offenders in the contemporary criminal justice system, where the goal of rehabilitation clearly is secondary to the goal of punishment.

From a rehabilitative perspective, the court's main responsibility is to provide treatment to prevent the further development of antisocial or other problems. The approach presumes that adolescents commit crimes because of circumstances that have failed them (e.g., lack of parental support) and that youths alone should not be held accountable for the acts. According to this model, society is, in part, responsible for not having provided adolescent offenders with adequate support and protection, and it is the function of the court to act as a benevolent caretaker or *parens patriae* (ultimate parent).

In recent years, despite the well-documented needs of delinquent youth, the contemporary juvenile court has made increasing commitments to the ideals of punishment and retribution (Feld, 1998). No doubt, the mission of the court has shifted toward assigning punitive sanctions and ensuring public safety in response to the surge of youth violence that occurred between the late 1980s and mid-1990s. Yet, although serious juvenile crime has declined consistently and considerably since then (Snyder & Sickmund, 1999), policy makers have maintained a "get tough" approach to youthful offending. Indeed, between 1992 and 1995, the legislatures in 47 states and the District of Columbia toughened their juvenile justice laws so that increasing numbers of adolescents could be prosecuted as adults (Torbet, Gable, & Hurst, 1996).

From the punishment perspective, it is assumed that youths make deliberate choices to commit crimes and that they should be held accountable for their actions, regardless of their cognitive abilities, psychosocial immaturity, or age. The severity of punishment is linked to the seriousness of the crime, the idea being that the experience of severe sanctions will deter youths from breaking the law in the future. This shift toward punishment has continued despite mounting general evidence that punitive sanctions are less effective at reducing crime than are rehabilitative responses (Lipsey & Wilson, 1998; Loesel, 1995) and despite specific evidence that adolescents who are prosecuted as adults are 30% more likely than those who are processed in the juvenile justice system to be rearrested, both sooner and for more serious offenses (Bishop, Frazier, Lanza-Kaduce, & Winner, 1996; Fagan, 1995). Thus, contrary to popular belief and current policy trends, a punitive orientation to crime neither reduces recidivism nor preserves public safety (Fagan, 1990).

In light of the evidence in support of approaches that emphasize treatment over punishment, it seems likely that rehabilitative responses to youthful offending are in a better position to facilitate adolescents' transition to adulthood. Given what we know about the typical adult outcomes of court-involved youth, it is reasonable to assume that many of

these adolescents exit the justice system and move into adulthood psychosocially ill-equipped to manage adult roles and responsibilities. To improve young offenders' chances of becoming healthy and productive adults, therefore, we argue that practitioners and policy makers need to shift at least some of the juvenile court's emphasis back toward rehabilitation and strike a new balance between punishment and treatment. Although the juvenile court must uphold its responsibility to adequately punish youths for their crimes, it must simultaneously honor its responsibility to not impede young offenders' development such that it compromises their chances of making a successful transition to adulthood. By placing more emphasis on facilitating the psychosocial development of delinquent youth, interventions in the justice system can increase the chances that these adolescents will have healthy turning point opportunities after they exit the justice system and, perhaps more important, that they will be psychosocially equipped to translate these experiences into positive adult outcomes.

**Finding the Balance Between Punishment and Rehabilitation:  
A Consideration of Three Challenges That Face the Justice System**

A rehabilitative stance toward young offenders draws attention to three challenges that need to be addressed if practitioners and policy makers want to improve adult outcomes for court-involved youth: (a) that the system may not provide young offenders developmentally appropriate experiences that facilitate their transition to adulthood; (b) that many young offenders have serious mental health and educational deficiencies that challenge their achievement of psychosocial maturity; and (c) that the system may expose young offenders to harmful experiences (e.g., violence, trauma) that serve to send adolescents out of the system with more problems than when they entered. With an understanding of each of these challenges, practitioners and policy makers can better decide how to facilitate youths' psychosocial development, while balancing the punishment and treatment goals of the justice system.

*Facilitating the Development of Psychosocial Maturity in a Punitive Setting*

To serve the dual interests of the juvenile court—to both punish misdeeds and rehabilitate antisocial youth—the current justice system faces a thorny challenge. At a time when adolescents require experiences that promote the development of responsible autonomy and competent interpersonal relationships, however, current methods of punishment, such as incarceration in a secure facility, all but preclude the facilitation of psychosocial development. The most restrictive settings (i.e., detention, secure treatment, and incarceration) face the greatest challenge in this respect. Detention and secure treatment facilities mandate behavioral and educational goals within a secured, controlled context. As a result, healthy exploration that permits adolescents to develop a sense of mastery, forge relationships with prosocial friends, and experiment with romantic partners is almost always precluded for adolescents living in a secure facility.

We acknowledge that some rehabilitative attempts are made within highly restrictive, secure settings, mainly by providing adolescents with training in education and job skills at correctional facilities. At the same time, though, the system's effort to train adolescents for school and work may not, in itself, facilitate adequate psychosocial development. Without consistent support from significant adults and enough freedom to exercise autonomy, the



gradual process of maturation—to learn self-direction, social perspective, and responsibility—may be effectively cut off.

Perhaps the greatest constraint set by detention and incarceration for adolescents is the necessity to move out of their home, away from the security of family. Sending an adolescent away from home for several months entails a serious disruption of informal care that can curtail psychosocial development. As adolescents are striving for a sense of who they are among others, gaining perspective on their actions and its consequences requires the support, guidance, and modeling of significant adults. And despite the stereotype of offenders' parents as a uniformly bad influence on their behavior and development, recent research indicates that the family environments of serious youthful offenders are far more heterogeneous than widely believed (Steinberg & Chung, 2003). An overly punitive orientation within the justice system likely hinders processes of normative psychosocial development by disrupting offenders' relationships with parents, teachers, and other sources of adult support and guidance.

In addition, while away from home, detained youth have virtually no opportunity to build prosocial peer or romantic relationships because social interactions are under close scrutiny, and the only peers in residence are other delinquent youth. With limited opportunity for positive peer socialization or romance, incarcerated adolescents are effectively precluded from one of the most important sources of social development during the adolescent period (Patterson, Capaldi, & Bank, 1991). Further, the loss of consistent support from intimate friends and romantic partners while away from home can have important consequences for young offenders. Ethnographic work suggests that the consistent acceptance and support of female friends and romantic partners provides male young adult offenders reason and strength to follow through on conventional goals (Hughes, 1998).

Providing detainees adequate peer support is a tremendous challenge in correctional facilities because fellow residents share a delinquent past, and coeducational housing is not practicable or safe. In the best case scenario, facilities housing young offenders may structure their programs to provide on-site activities, such as athletic leagues, to promote cooperative effort, sportsmanship, and team commitment among residents. In this way, although adolescents may not necessarily enjoy close, satisfying relationships with prosocial friends while they are detained, they may learn the value of commitment, support, and sportsmanship and maintain those values within the relationships they choose when they return home.

The most potentially damaging aspect of adolescents' passage through the justice system is its effects on individuals' sense of competence and orientation toward the future. Early criminal labeling and serious sanctions can alter adolescents' goals because convictions for felony offenses preclude adolescents' eligibility for a variety of careers (Moffitt, 1993). The psychological effect of this early labeling may be seen in delinquent youths' views of the future. Oyserman and Markus (1990) found indirect support for this link in their comparison of delinquents' and nondelinquents' "possible selves." Whereas nondelinquent youths' self-conceptions showed a balance between fears and expectations, delinquent youths' fears about themselves exceeded their hopes and expectations. The long-term developmental effect of labeling can be tremendous, as youth may respond to society's recrimination by withdrawing further from conventional activities and seeking support, approval, and esteem from deviant peers and criminal networks.

*Providing Mental Health Treatment for Vulnerable  
Youth in an Inherently Unhealthy Setting*

The majority of young offenders in the justice system enter the system with liabilities that interfere with normative psychosocial development under the best of circumstances. Accordingly, a second important challenge facing the justice system is to provide delinquent youth adequate treatment for mental health and learning problems. Recent studies reflect tremendous unmet mental health need within delinquent populations. A recent epidemiological study of juvenile detainees reported that nearly two thirds of male, and three quarters of female, detainees have one or more clinical psychiatric disorders (Teplin, 2002). Although estimates vary, most recent analyses indicate that rates of mental disturbance among juvenile offenders are three times as high as in the general population of adolescents (Grisso, in press). Many advocates today suggest, in fact, that the juvenile justice system has become a de facto service system for disadvantaged, minority youth (Knitzer, 1996). Learning disorders and physical disabilities as well as mental health problems are also common among juvenile delinquents (National Council on Disability, 2003), and because of psychosocial dysfunction and truancy, most young offenders perform well below their age range academically regardless of their abilities (Foley, 2001). Delinquent youths' psychological vulnerability is usually coupled with a high level of familial risk and low levels of adequate support for guiding adolescents through important developmental transitions. Multiple early familial precursors of antisocial behavior, including parental criminality (Farrington, 1989), familial poverty, poor parent-child relationships, and lax parental monitoring, are common in the histories of serious adolescent offenders (Hawkins et al., 1998; Lipsey & Derzon, 1998).

Addressing the mental health treatment needs of juvenile detainees would be a daunting task even for the most specialized service providers. As it is currently designed, however, the justice system is neither equipped nor philosophically driven to effectively address the mental health needs of delinquent youth (Cocozza & Skowrya, 2000; Soler, 2002; Tolan & Gorman-Smith, 1997). The punitive stance of the juvenile court since Gault has brought into question court-involved youths' entitlement to mental health treatment. Even when entitlement to treatment is clear, the justice system lacks the resources, coordination, and training to provide effective treatment. Court personnel, including probation officers, judges, and defense counsel, often do not understand the results of mental health evaluations or the most appropriate targeting of mental health services for youth because they have limited training in child development or clinical psychology. Crucial ingredients of effective mental health services, such as individualized treatment, targeted assessments, targeted psychiatric treatment, family-based services, and adequate follow-up, are often missing within residential treatment facilities and almost entirely absent within detention and incarceration (Soler, 2002).

Because mental health treatment is currently secondary to retribution in the justice system, the system does not systematically consider the long-term consequences of young offenders' unmet mental health needs. Current longitudinal studies suggest that the social burden of delinquent adolescents' unmet mental health needs is tremendous. When left untreated, childhood psychological problems may worsen and result in serious and costly psychiatric morbidity by adulthood (Moffitt, Caspi, Harrington, & Milne, 2002). Antisocial adolescents who are the most psychologically vulnerable are also more likely to have problems adjusting to positive adult roles.

*The Mission to Protect in a Harmful Setting*

The punitive trend in juvenile sentencing has compounded the burden of protecting youth in justice facilities (Feld, 1998). In recent years, evaluations of juvenile correctional facilities have documented numerous hazards and abuses endemic to incarceration. A national evaluation sponsored by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) found widespread overcrowding at juvenile facilities, with 62% of all delinquent males residing in overcrowded facilities (Snyder & Sickmund, 1995). Overcrowding creates tremendous tensions between and among staff and residents, strains available service resources within facilities, and inevitably encourages authoritarian styles of control, including the increased use of restraints and isolation for managing misbehavior (Parent et al., 1994). Evaluations of several states' juvenile facilities have reported physical punishment and humiliation by staff, and staff's failure to prevent inmate aggression or homosexual rape by inmates (Bartollas, Miller, & Dinitz, 1976; Lerner, 1986). The toll of increasing violence and authoritarian control at juvenile facilities is reflected in data from a recent report indicating that each month, 2000 juvenile residents are injured and 970 youth attempt suicide (Snyder, Sickmund, & Poe-Yamagata, 1996). In response to these violent trends, advocates have recommended national mandates to reduce overcrowding, provide more individualized treatment, and increase system accountability for abuses at juvenile facilities (Fagan, 1990). Yet, even if minimal protections are mandated, the institutional housing of delinquent youth for punitive purposes presents inherent potential for youth to experience and observe violence and aggression, which can cause or exacerbate psychological problems (Sampson & Lauritsen, 1994). Youthful offenders are at even greater risk within adult correctional facilities, where they are frequently victimized by adult offenders (Fagan, Forst, & Vivona, 1989).

Even in the absence of overt violence, the deterrent model of many juvenile facilities may inadvertently promote deviant relationships and irresponsibility, particularly when milieu or group interventions are used (Dishion, McCord, & Poulin, 1999). Moreover, because court decisions to place youth in secure facilities are based primarily on adolescents' history of prior arrests, and secondarily on their mental health needs and the availability of appropriate caregivers, there is often a mismatch between an offender's service needs and the services that are available to him or her (Lyons, Baerger, Quigley, Erlich, & Griffin, 2001).

Inevitably, group interventions involve aggregating youth with a history of antisocial behavior. Several experimental studies of peer group interventions for adolescent problem behavior have shown that this method at best produces no effect and at worst has iatrogenic effects on adolescent problem behavior (Dishion et al., 1999). The iatrogenic (i.e., harmful but unintended) effect of peer group interventions is linked to the amount of time deviant peers spend together and the degree of social dysfunction and deviance among the youths.

The iatrogenic effects of spending time with a concentrated collection of antisocial peers are exacerbated when adolescents are placed in facilities that house adult criminals along with young offenders. Not only do these placements put adolescents into close contact with adults who have long antisocial histories, but they also expose youths to violence and sexual assault, both of which can hinder normal psychosocial development. It is not surprising that rates of attempted suicide are higher among juveniles in adult facilities than among their counterparts in placements designed for adolescents (Bishop et al., 1996).

## **Conclusions**

Discussions of justice policy and practice seldom consider the psychosocial needs of late adolescents, focusing instead on the primary goal of deterring offenders from future criminal behavior and, secondarily, on facilitating the educational and occupational success of youths who are exiting the justice system. As a consequence, justice systems emphasize punishment, which presumably promotes desistance, and academic or vocational training, which presumably facilitate future success in school and work.

Although we agree that punishment and training are important components of the justice system's response to youthful offending, they alone are unlikely to suffice. To make a successful transition into adult roles, individuals need to exit late adolescence with sufficient psychosocial maturity to make autonomous decisions, establish competent interpersonal relationships, and exercise self-governance. These capacities are not likely to be promoted by punishment, classroom instruction, or job training.

The widespread failure of punishment and training approaches to the rehabilitation of young offenders is readily apparent in the statistics on the adult outcomes of individuals who have penetrated deeply into the justice system. Although it is not clear what proportion of these adult difficulties are attributable to the characteristics and life circumstances of the offenders that got them into the justice system in the first place, and what proportion are attributable to these individuals' experiences in the justice system, it is clear that the justice system does little to treat the problems offenders bring with them when they enter the system, little to promote the successful development of offenders while they are in the system, and little to protect offenders from the potential iatrogenic effects of system involvement. Indeed, the best predictors of successful adulthood among young offenders inhere in the quality of relationships they form after exiting the system and not in the experiences they have while exposed to the system's sanctions and interventions. The capacity of ex-offenders to form and maintain these high quality relationships, however, likely depends on their level of psychosocial development.

The considerable problems faced by young offenders as they move into adulthood suggest that they lack many of the foundational psychosocial capacities requisite for the successful transition into adult roles. Put most bluntly, however, the context of justice system intervention is one that is more likely to arrest individuals' development than promote it. The deficiency inherent in an overly punitive approach to justice system intervention is that punishment, although an effective deterrent against future offending, does little more than reduce recidivism (and it may not even do this very effectively). Punishment does nothing to prepare young people for the successful reentry into the community and, as such, heightens the chances that the young offender will experience failure in the worlds of education and work and in the establishment of healthy interpersonal relationships. The deficiency inherent in the approach to rehabilitation that emphasizes training and skill acquisition alone is that it fails to address the underlying psychosocial capacities necessary to translate these skills into gainful employment. Thus, for example, a young offender may leave a residential treatment program that offers training in automotive repair with the ability to fix a car but without the psychosocial capacities necessary for being able to report to work on time each day or manage his earnings.

Our analysis suggests that we need to reexamine the goals and methods of the justice system from a developmental perspective if we are to facilitate the successful transition of young offenders into adult roles and responsibilities. Such a perspective identifies the

specific psychosocial tasks of late adolescence and asks how their negotiation is facilitated by the context in which young people come of age. As we have suggested, the necessary conditions for successful psychosocial development in late adolescence include the presence of supportive adults as well as opportunities to develop responsible autonomy, acquire important competencies, and establish positive relationships with prosocial peers. Although it is unrealistic to expect a justice system with the dual challenges of punishment and rehabilitation to replicate perfectly the conditions known to facilitate healthy development among nonoffenders, it is not unrealistic to ask that the system, at the very least, keep these considerations in mind.

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## APPENDIX

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### *Three Components of Psychosocial Maturity*

Mastery and Competence  
 Interpersonal Relationships and Social Functioning  
 Self-Definition and Self-Governance

### *Contexts Affecting the Psychosocial Maturity of Young Offenders*

Family  
 Peer Group  
 School  
 Workplace  
 Correctional Facilities

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