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Long-Term Criminal Trajectories of Youth Sanctioned in Adult Courts

Today all 50 states and the District of Columbia maintain various mechanisms through which juveniles can be prosecuted and punished in adult courts. While considerable research examines the characteristics of transferred youth, there is little knowledge regarding the impact of adult system processing on later-life outcomes—particularly the continuation in, or desistance from, offending. The Adult Trajectories of Juvenile Offenders data set compiled by the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) allows the opportunity to conduct ground-breaking research in this area. In addition to providing the first long-term follow-up of youth punished as adults, this data has several other unique features that make it ideal for the study of this population. Specifically: 1) the data were collected in New York state, which processes all 16 and 17-year-olds as adults rather than a select transferred subsample; 2) the sample includes three cohorts depicting times that represent the initial rise, peak, and subsequent decline in youth violence, and; 3) the data transcend state boundaries to include national rap sheet data to provide a more complete picture of long-term offending trajectories.

The proposed research would capitalize on these unique features of the data to answer the following questions:

1. What is the overall pattern of criminal court sentencing of 16- and 17-year-old offenders and what are the key sources of heterogeneity in sentence severity?
2. What are the short and long-term criminal trajectories of youth receiving substantial adult court interventions and how do these trajectories differ based on characteristics of the offender, the offending history, and the severity of system intervention?
3. How do patterns of desistance and the identification of the type of individual that desists differ across analytical models and what are the implications of these differences for criminal justice research?
4. What, if any, differences exist across cohorts in initial sentence severity and long-term offending trajectories due to the context of the time period (e.g. rates of youth violence and the get tough movement)?
5. How do the landscape of youthful offending and offender-trajectories differ based upon state-specific or national models?

The PI for this research brings to the BJS collaboration a long history of research on the processing of juveniles in adult court as well as the use of advanced statistical techniques to model long-term criminal trajectories. The project will result in three publishable products written in collaboration with BJS staff as well as academic articles and presentations.