

RESEARCH HIGHLIGHT

Longitudinal Studies II: Pathways to Desistance



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Date: January 22, 2020

Introduction

In our [previous newsletter](#), we introduced our readers to the basic tenets of longitudinal studies. This *Research Highlight* describes one of such studies: Pathways to Desistance (Pathways).

Pathways resulted from the planning efforts of the MacArthur Foundation Research Network on Adolescent Development and Juvenile Justice. It was created to assist in providing practitioners and policymakers with empirical information that could be applied to improve juvenile justice practice (Mulvey et al., 2004).

Led by Edward Mulvey, PhD, Carol Schubert, M.P.H, a team of research investigators and a [working group](#), this longitudinal study has focused on serious (mostly felony) adolescent offenders in Philadelphia County, PA and Maricopa County, AZ. The sample participants, 1,354 youth, were enrolled in the study between 2000 and 2003 and were followed for seven years. In the first three years of the study, data were collected every six months. After that, data were collected annually (Mulvey, Schubert, & Piquero, 2014). Overall, the project aims to answer questions about changes in offending patterns over time, particularly the process of how people stop, or *desist*, from engaging in criminal activity. Pathways has been [funded](#) by federal and state agencies, as well as foundations.

What makes Pathways Unique?

Pathways is the “largest longitudinal study of *serious adolescent offenders* ever done” (CRHC Data Center; our emphasis). Most of the data are publicly available through the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research ([ICPSR](#)) archive. The research team collected a wide array of data to ascertain youth’s attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, and contexts to provide a more holistic picture of how these discrete areas interact in shaping an individual’s development.

In addition to the semi-annual and yearly data collection points mentioned above, Pathways has rich monthly-level data about specific life events. Each month youth were asked to answer questions about their living situation, education, and contact with

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the legal system. These follow up interviews are referred to as “Life Event Calendars” ([LEC](#)) and consist of qualitative data that were quantitatively coded. LEC data are access-restricted, meaning that interested researchers must complete a formal data request protocol rather than simply downloading the information from the ICPSR archive.

When studying recidivism, it is important to account for *exposure time*, meaning the opportunity people have to commit more offenses. Take this hypothetical: two adolescents committed the same number of offenses in a recall period (the time between data collection points) but one was in a detention center for half the time and the other was in the community for the entire period. A quick look would see both these adolescents committing the same number of offenses, but the former adolescent is actually offending at double the *rate* of the latter. Pathways has three indicators of exposure time because time in the community can be highly variable in the amounts of supervision to which a person is subjected. This study can differentiate between participants’ time not in the community, in the community with supervision, and in the community without supervision.

Notable Findings

Does an adolescent’s drug use depend on their perspective of police legitimacy? Will an adolescent recidivate if they report high levels of delinquency in their peer group? Do adolescents “specialize” in a certain type of criminal behavior or are they more “generalist”? These and more are examples of research questions that can be explored as they change over time in this unique sample of serious adolescent offenders.

In 2011, Dr. Mulvey authored an OJJDP fact sheet summarizing some key findings from Pathways research. Only 9% of high rate offending adolescents continued to be high rate offenders at the end of data collection. Roughly 50% of adolescents reported declining rates of offending, and the remainder held consistent moderate- to low- level rates of offending (Mulvey, 2011). An important factor that differentiated the individuals who continued offending at high rates *versus* the individuals who desisted was substance use. Long sentences in detention centers are not effective, and supervision in the community is an important step for youth returning after a placement.

Since this fact sheet’s publication in 2011, 356 academic articles using the Pathways data have been registered at the ICPSR [webpage](#), with more on their way. Research has been published in top academic journals such as *Criminology*, the *Journal of Quantitative Criminology*, *Public Health*, and *Developmental Psychology*. Topics range from substance use, to mental health, to peer influence, to carrying a weapon, and of course, offending behaviors. Some recent studies have produced theory development and testing (Thomas & Vogel 2019; Kijowski & Wilson, under review), examined co-occurring behaviors (Docherty et al., 2019), and explored the relationship between perceptions and actions (Loughran, Reid, Collins, Mulvey, 2016).

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Next Month

In February our *Research Highlight* will cover the intergenerational Rochester Youth Development Study (RYDS).

Until next time,

Alysha

What do you want to see in future Research Highlights? Let us know [here](#).

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