

Rare look at youth post detention is bleak

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A new Northwestern Medicine study offers a bleak assessment in a rare look at the outcomes of delinquent youth five and 12 years after juvenile detention.

Central to poor outcomes for the youth post detention are stark and persistent racial, ethnic and gender disparities, according to the massive study that began in the mid-1990s.

African-American males fared the worst, with lives characterized by incarceration, criminal activity and few positive outcomes. Hispanic males functioned more poorly overall than non-Hispanic white males. Females, however, functioned significantly better than males in nearly every domain, according to the report.

In the first large-scale longitudinal study to document the dearth of long-term positive outcomes among delinquent youth as they age, the researchers assessed the achievement of eight positive outcomes: educational attainment, residential independence, gainful activity, desistance from [criminal activity](#), mental health, abstaining from substance abuse, interpersonal functioning and parenting responsibility.

The study, "Sex and Racial/Ethnic Differences in Positive Outcomes in Delinquent Youth After Detention: A 12-Year Longitudinal Study," will be published online Dec. 19 in *JAMA Pediatrics*. It included a randomly selected sample of more than 1,800 detained youth.

Karen M. Abram, the study's first author and associate professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine, said many delinquent youth are at great risk for poor outcomes in adulthood because of histories of profound trauma and loss, and limited social support, adult guidance and academic success.

The cycle of disadvantage may be most profound for racial/ethnic minorities who have fewer

resources and opportunities to fulfill adult responsibilities, according to the report.

"Involvement in the juvenile justice system can lead to a downward spiral that is difficult to reverse," Abram said.

Many middle and upper-class kids perpetrate delinquent acts but may not suffer the same consequences, said Linda Teplin, senior author of the study.

"For example, wealthier families are more likely to be able to afford treatment if their kids use drugs," added Teplin, the Owen L. Coon Professor of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences and director of the Health Disparities and Public Policy Program at Feinberg. "So their children might never be arrested and incarcerated."

Why did the females, faced with many of the same problems that the males experienced, do so much better?

"Delinquency among females is largely confined to adolescence," Abram said. "As they age, females are more likely than males to be involved in prosocial activities and relationships including parenting."

Females in the study were more than 18 times more likely to be parenting their children than were males.

Additional findings (12 years after detention)

- Only half of the participants had a high school degree or equivalent.
- One-fifth of males and one-third of females were working full time or in school.
- Non-Hispanic whites had more than five times the odds of gainful activity than African-Americans and more than two times the odds than Hispanics.
- African-Americans and Hispanics were more likely to abstain from substance abuse

compared with non-Hispanic whites.

"Our goal was to document the adult social role outcomes of youth who had been detained," said Teplin, a faculty associate with Northwestern's Institute for Policy Research. "No one had done that."

According to the researchers, most prior studies with "delinquent" in the title looked at general population youth to see who became delinquent. In other words, delinquency was an outcome. Far fewer researchers studied youth after they were already in the juvenile justice system, and those that did focused on criminal recidivism.

The findings, the authors said, underscore that for delinquent youth to succeed, society must help them to not only desist from crime but to overcome barriers to social stability and employment.

"Our findings highlight the need to address racial and ethnic disparities, because who gets arrested and detained? It's poor kids," Teplin said. "And disproportionately racial and ethnic minorities."

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