

# Perceptions and Outcomes in Adolescent Confinement

While the content of programming in juvenile facilities has been the subject of much study, there has been less work on the broader “institutional environment” and its effect on outcomes. Significantly, adolescents themselves are seldom asked about their perceptions of their time in confinement—especially in ways that are measurable, consistent, and designed to connect their perceptions to subsequent behavior. The Pathways to Desistance study, which followed more than 1,350 juvenile offenders for 7 years, provided an opportunity to do this. The researchers found that the adolescents’ assessments of specific aspects of the environment, as well as their overall assessment, were associated with subsequent outcomes such as self-reported offending, rearrest, or return to confinement. **The findings confirm that individually focused programming and systematic planning for release can make a difference for these adolescents and the communities in which they will live.**

## Background

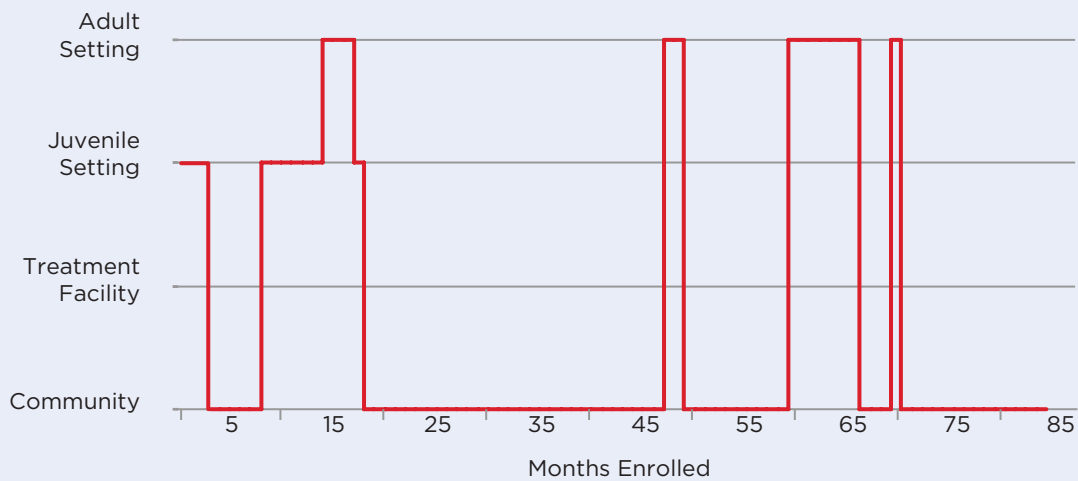
Residential confinement for juvenile offenders can be a contentious issue. Should its purpose be retribution? Rehabilitation? Community safety? Should it be used at all? Regardless of what one thinks of the practice, court-ordered placement is likely to remain a feature of the juvenile justice system for the foreseeable future. While its use has declined almost 40 percent over the past decade, confinement remains a significant part of the system: on any given day, some 71,000 juveniles are in state-run or privately contracted residential facilities across the United States.

Who are these youth? As juvenile justice systems move toward community-based alternatives for less serious offenders, the young people in residential facilities increasingly are those who have committed serious or repeated

offenses. Their lives and behavior frequently are complicated by issues such as trauma and victimization, school and work problems, troubled families, and substance use. These are the adolescents who are often viewed as being the greatest threat to public safety and in need of the most intensive interventions and the most secure treatment. At the same time, they are still adolescents, still developing in multiple domains of their lives, still connected to their families—and still amenable to positive change.

As the country struggles with the question of balancing rehabilitation and community safety, it is essential that we understand the use and effects of residential placement—including how juvenile offenders experience their time in these facilities, and how it affects their subsequent behavior. This connection is not a new idea; social scientists

**FIGURE 1**  
**Female, Age 17 at Enrollment**



have long recognized that behavior, immediate and long term, is influenced by both person and setting. The Pathways study has made it possible to measure the connection for this group of young offenders, and to put the knowledge to work to improve youth outcomes, system operations, and community safety.

### **Repeated confinement is common for serious offenders.**

Serious juvenile offenders can spend a substantial portion of their adolescence in residential placement. Eighty-seven percent of the participants in the Pathways study spent time in a juvenile or adult facility, or both, over the seven-year follow-up period. On average, these youth spent 37 percent of the seven years in confinement—nearly as much time as other young people spend on a college campus to get an undergraduate degree.

But time in placement is only one factor to consider. The study also looked at the patterns of movement in and out of facilities, and found that these adolescents experience frequent, jarring disruptions in their lives, repeated over a period of many years. Looking just at the juvenile placements is instructive. The 667

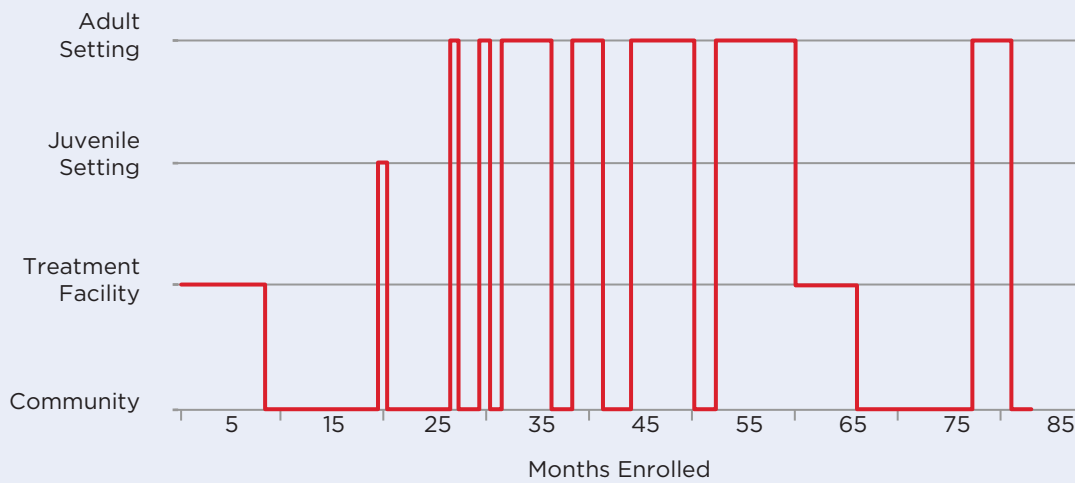
youth who spent time in a juvenile facility had a total of 1,578 juvenile placements. On average, these young offenders had stays in 2.4 different institutions prior to age 18; the range was one to 13 distinct placements. Figures 1 and 2 show typical examples of this cycling in and out of confinement.

Of course, every offender has a unique pattern of institutional stays. But every move means a change in living situation, and in institutional rules and demands—and these happen throughout extended periods of an adolescent’s development. What is the effect of this pattern on their behavior? The continuing use of confinement should motivate us to evaluate it from a variety of perspectives, including those of the offenders themselves, to learn what we can do to reduce repeat offending and placements.

### **Adolescents’ perceptions matter.**

The Pathways investigators developed a tool that reliably and consistently measures young offenders’ perceptions about the functioning—and likely effectiveness—of an institution’s environment (Figure 3). The idea was that if facilities with better ratings on certain dimensions have more success with the youth

**FIGURE 2**  
Male, Age 17 at Enrollment



who spend time there, then it would make sense to urge institutions to work toward improving those aspects of their environment. This goes beyond quality assurance; it offers a method to reduce recidivism and improve lives by improving institutional processes.

**FIGURE 3**  
Dimensions and Components of the Institutional Experience

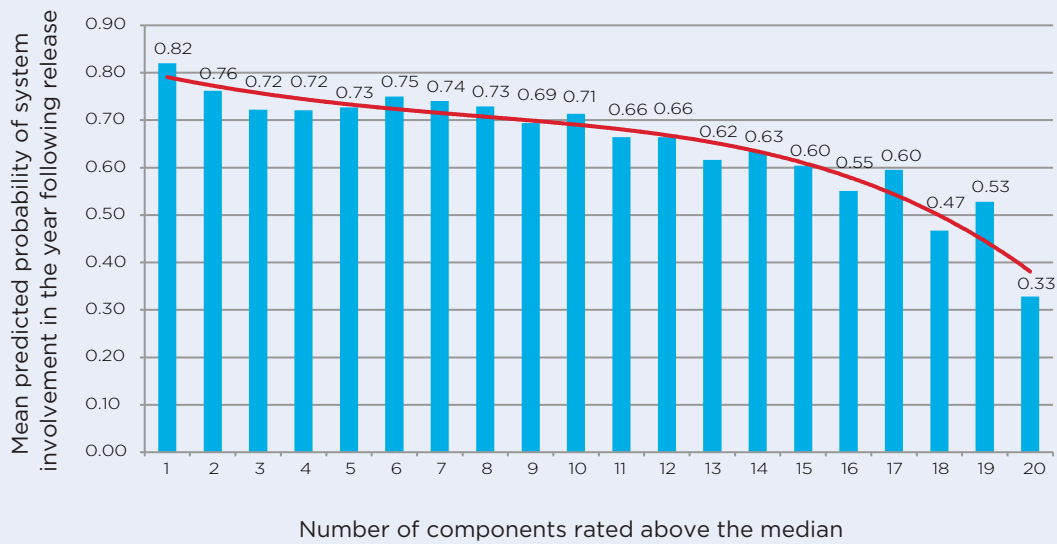
Dimensions	Components
Safety	Fear Exposure to violence
Institutional order	Staff negative behavior Staff connectedness Organization
Harshness	Sanctions Number of restrictions Costs of punishment
Caring adults	Types of situation Diversity of staff roles
Fairness	Bias by staff Overall fairness
Antisocial peers	Peer delinquent behavior Peer negative influence Gangs
Services	Mental health services Having a primary caregiver Vocational services
Reentry planning	Focus on the future Release counselor

The investigators examined the relationships among residents’ perceptions and outcomes during the year following each youth’s release. The basic question was whether perceptions influenced outcomes—self-reported offending, rearrest, or return to an institutional setting—for each youth.

The study showed clearly that, for these serious offenders, perceptions do matter. A youth’s perceptions of certain dimensions of the institutional experience were linked to outcomes even when the investigators controlled for the type of facility and for individual characteristics such as age, offending history, and peer and neighborhood characteristics. Some dimensions, moreover, are associated with sizable reductions in undesirable outcomes.

More specifically, different dimensions relate to different outcomes. For example, both the *reentry planning* dimension and the *services* dimension are significantly associated with less subsequent involvement with the justice system, including arrest or return to an institution. For serious offenders, having a primary caregiver during the institutional placement or an aftercare worker who helps plan for an adolescent’s return to the community reduces the probability of

**FIGURE 4**  
**More positive institutional experience predicts less likelihood of system involvement.**



subsequent system involvement from about 75 percent to about 60 percent.

Other dimensions—those concerning the interpersonal environment of a facility—appear to be related to antisocial behavior during the year following release. Youth reporting fewer antisocial peers in the institutional setting report 33 percent less antisocial activity in the year following release. Similarly, perceptions of greater order and less harshness in an institution are associated with reductions in antisocial activity of 15 percent and 13 percent, respectively.

The effects seen with specific dimensions led Pathways investigators to wonder whether environments rated more positively across the board would also produce significantly better outcomes. They looked at the effect of ratings across all 20 components of the eight dimensions and found, after controlling for individual characteristics, that the general environment of the institution seemed to matter substantially. When a greater number of components are rated favorably, there is a significant reduction in the average predicted probability of system involvement (Figure 4) and in reported antisocial activity

### Implications for policy, practice, and research

- Ask the users.** Fields as disparate as education, health care, and business have highlighted the importance of organizational environment and the user experience. However, with a few laudable exceptions (see “References,” below), the viewpoints of juvenile offenders regarding their experiences in institutional settings have been largely ignored. As a result, policy makers and practitioners have typically been designing and implementing sanctions and interventions without understanding how they are perceived by the client and how those perceptions might relate to outcomes. The findings presented here demonstrate that the institutional environment, as seen through the eyes of the adolescents confined there, does make a difference. Expanded efforts to obtain and use residents’ perceptions would be valuable.
- Provide individualized care and plan for reentry.** This study is consistent with existing research and with a fundamental principle of the juvenile justice system: that providing

appropriate, structured programming can have a positive impact on subsequent behavior, and that reentry planning is a key element in this effort. It is reasonable that individually-focused care for a youth—for example, a primary caregiver and a person assigned to help the youth plan for re-entry—will promote a match to appropriate services during placement and at re-entry. This study reinforces these ideas and provides evidence of how much they matter.

- **Monitor staff for negative behavior and use of restrictions.** Positive modeling and connection between staff members and residents are usually considered to be critical components of effective institutional environments. By the same token, harsh, disorganized environments could contribute to a negative affective response, prompting seemingly “justified” involvement in antisocial behavior. Again, the study gives support to these ideas.
- **Address the environment as well as programs.** Current discussion about the use of evidence-based practices in juvenile justice has recognized that significant improvement will not simply be the result of establishing more “brand name” programs. Settings must also be examined for how they affect youth outcomes and how they might help innovative approaches flourish. Future research must examine not only which treatment modalities and interventions are most effective and the general principles that characterize “what works,” but also the environment in which those services are delivered. Improving juvenile justice services rests on addressing both challenges.

## REFERENCES

This brief is based on two published papers:

Mulvey, E., Schubert, C., & Odgers, C. (2010) A method for measuring organizational functioning in juvenile justice facilities using resident ratings. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 37, 1255-1277.

Schubert, C., Mulvey, E., Loughran, T., & Losoya, S. (2012). Perceptions of institutional experience and community outcomes for serious adolescent offenders. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 39, 1, 71-93.

In addition, the viewpoints of incarcerated youth about aspects of the institutional environment have been examined by the Performance-based Standards (PbS) Project of the Council of Juvenile Correctional Administrators (CJCA), and by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention’s “Survey of Youth in Residential Placement.”

The Pathways to Desistance study is a multi-site, longitudinal study of serious adolescent offenders as they transition from adolescence into early adulthood. It is funded by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation in partnership with federal and state agencies and other foundations. For more information, contact Carol Schubert at [schubertca@upmc.edu](mailto:schubertca@upmc.edu), or visit the Pathways website, [www.pathwaysstudy.pitt.edu](http://www.pathwaysstudy.pitt.edu).

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**Models for Change: Systems Reform in Juvenile Justice**, launched in 2004, is a multi-state initiative working to guide and accelerate advances in juvenile justice, to make systems more fair, effective, rational, and developmentally appropriate.

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