



Serious juvenile offenders who have experienced emerging adulthood: Substance use and recidivism



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ABSTRACT

Using data from the California Youth Authority, this article examines whether or not specific substance use differentially predicts recidivism for individual offense-type among a group of serious juvenile offenders who have experienced *emerging adulthood*. The results of the logistic regression analysis indicate that users of specific substances have a higher overall likelihood of receipt of a subsequent arrest for different offense-types when compared to other substances. Specifically, among the 524 serious juvenile offenders analyzed, one demographic, one social bond, and two substance use measures were significant indicators of an offender being arrested during the seven-year follow-up period. The social bond measure of full-time employment and substance use measure of using mind-altering drugs were significant indicators of receipt of an arrest for a non-violent offense, while being non-white and reported use of uppers/downers were significant predictors of arrest(s) for violent and both non-violent and violent offenses. Policy implications, limitations, and directions for future research are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Over the past several decades, numerous efforts have been made to address youth offending. Substance use/abuse among juveniles, however, has arguably received the largest amount of legislative, public, and scholarly attention as such deviant behavior has proven to be widespread and predictive of future life outcomes. For 80% of juvenile offenders that come into contact with the juvenile justice system, substance use/abuse plays a role in their lawbreaking (National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University, 2004). The use and abuse of alcohol and drugs also influence juvenile recidivism into adulthood (Howard, Balster, Cottler, Wu, & Vaughn, 2008; Snyder & Howard, 2015).

With juvenile incarceration costing approximately \$5.7 billion each year and alcohol and drug treatment curriculums for youth offenders costing approximately \$139 million each year, there is a fiscal need to address the problem of substance use/abuse among children and young adults in the United States (Justice Policy Institute, 2009; NCASACU, 2004). The financial burden is even more apparent when recognizing that many juvenile perpetrators continue to offend as they transition into adulthood, contributing to a significant, yet unknown, portion of the \$68 billion each year in federal and state adult correctional budgets (Riordan & McDonald, 2009). In addition, with respect to the

well-being of youth, there is a need to determine the types of substance use/abuse that more commonly lead to repeat lawbreaking, so as to concentrate treatment on the prevention of specific illicit substance use and abuse that cause the most harm. This is especially true given that incarceration often fails to deter juvenile delinquency and presents further challenges for many juvenile offenders (Holman & Ziedenberg, 2011; Mulvey, 2011). Thus, the purpose of the present study is to identify what specific types of drug use/abuse, if any, differentially predict future arrests among a particular group of juvenile offenders.

The connection between substance use/abuse among juvenile offenders has been heavily demonstrated in prior research (Anglin & Speckart, 1988; Elliott, Huizinga, & Menard, 1989; Inciardi, 1979; Nurco, Hanlon, & Balter, 1991; Speckart & Anglin, 1986). Life course theories of criminal behavior have been among the more popular theoretical perspectives utilized to test and confirm this connection (Cubbins & Klepinger, 2007; Hser, Hamilton, & Niv, 2009; Hser, Longshore, & Anglin, 2007; Ragan & Beaver, 2010; Schroeder, Giordano, & Cernkovich, 2007). Sampson and Laub's (1993) age-graded theory of informal social control posits that juvenile offenders who continue to engage in deviant behaviors - such as substance use/abuse - hinder their ability to engage in pro-social behaviors that could have the potential for the development of informal social control, thus disrupting an offender's ability to desist from crime.

A newer and largely unexplored area in criminological/criminal justice research is the distinctive period of the life course proposed by Arnett (2000, 2005, 2007), referred to as *emerging adulthood*. Specifically, this theory refers to a finite period of time - approximately between

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18 and 25 years of age - where youth in certain cultures go through distinct identity exploration/formation not found in any other age groups and in most other cultures (Arnett, 2000). As such, individuals in this phase may be more inclined to experiment with substances (e.g., alcohol, marijuana, cocaine, and heroin) as part of identity formation or to even relieve stress that results from such identity formation/exploration (Arnett, 2005). Consequently, juvenile offenders, especially serious, already known to have substance use/abuse issues may be more inclined to experiment or even become dependent upon various substances during this distinct period of the life course (Arnett, 2005). However, it is unknown what role, if any, specific substance use plays in serious juvenile offenders' differential commission of individual crime-type as they experience *emerging adulthood*.

The present study examines what self-reported drug use among known serious juvenile offenders who have experienced *emerging adulthood* may differentially predict recidivism of individual offense-type. Specifically, this study will explore what explicit types of substances (i.e., alcohol, uppers/downers, mind-altering, and/or heroin) serious juvenile offenders reportedly use, and if such use differentially predicts arrest(s) for an individual offense-type (i.e., non-violent, violent, or both) as they experience *emerging adulthood*. This study can potentially result in a more comprehensive understanding of this distinct period of the life course of *emerging adulthood* for known serious juvenile offenders.

1.1. Substance use/abuse and juvenile offending

With most drug use beginning during one's early teens, a focus in criminological and criminal justice research has been placed upon understanding the role of substance use/abuse in relation to juvenile offending, ultimately finding a strong link between the two (Anglin & Speckart, 1988; Anthony & Petronis, 1995; Chaiken & Chaiken, 1990; Elliott et al., 1989; Inciardi, 1979; Nurco et al., 1991; Yu & Wilford, 1992). Such focus on this connection has centered on the age of onset and the specific role of substance use/abuse in juvenile offending. Most substance use has been identified as beginning during adolescence with some studies suggesting that substance use at the age of 14 or younger places the juvenile in the most vulnerable position to continue using substances throughout their life course (Chen & Kandel, 1995). Further compounding this issue is that adolescence is the period of the life course where drug use is more likely to escalate to higher overall levels (Anthony & Petronis, 1995; Yu & Wilford, 1992). Therefore, not only do the majority of known substance/drug users begin using during adolescence, but they also may escalate to higher-levels of use throughout their life course when compared to users who begin in adulthood. Some studies have even placed the age range of highest prevalence of drug use at 18 to 25 with few individuals experimenting with new substances after the age of 25 (Bachman et al., 2002; Chen & Kandel, 1995; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2004).

It has been estimated that as high as 78.4% of all teens who have contact with the juvenile justice system in some manner either tested positive for drugs, were under the influence of alcohol and/or drugs when they committed their arrested offense, were arrested for an alcohol or drug offense, admitted substance use/addiction issues, or some combination of each factor (NCASACU, 2004). Therefore, substance use/abuse plays some role in the vast majority of all juvenile offending. Moreover, 47% of 10 to 17-year olds that were arrested met or could have met the criteria for substance addiction according the standards of the DSM-IV (NCASACU, 2004). For individual offender-type, 72% of juvenile property offenders and 69.3% of juvenile violent offenders were involved with substance use/abuse to some degree (NCASACU, 2004). Consequently, this substance use/abuse can and often does continue into and throughout adulthood.

1.2. The life course

Although substance use and experimentation may be more likely to begin during adolescence, it does not mean that it concludes once adolescence ends. Engaging in drug use early in one's lifetime has been referred to as the "drug use career" since it does not exist solely in one's adolescence, but oftentimes extends throughout one's entire life course (McLellan, Lewis, O'Brien, & Kleber, 2000). Whether one continues to engage in drug use or desists has been found to depend on various factors. Specifically, life circumstances, such as marriage and employment (i.e., social bonds), have been shown to influence desistance (Beaver, Wright, DeLisi, & Vaughn, 2008; King, Massoglia, & MacMillan, 2007; Laub, Nagin, & Sampson, 1998; Sampson & Laub, 1993, 2003). One study by Cubbins and Klepinger (2007) found that childhood family experiences and ethnic differences were also important for understanding the desistance process, as younger users became adults. For alcohol and drug use/abuse and its influence upon offending throughout the life course, Schroeder et al. (2007) found that drugs had a more substantial and longer overall lasting impact on one's life course offending patterns than when compared to alcohol use/abuse.

For more than two decades, life course perspectives of criminal behavior, such as Moffitt's (1993) adolescence-limited and life-course-persistent antisocial behavior and Sampson and Laub's (1993) age-graded theory of informal social control, have become mainstream theoretical perspectives used to study criminal behavior throughout the life course. As such, this has resulted in a strong research foci pertaining to an offender's tendency to persist to or desist from offending throughout their life (e.g., Hser et al., 2009; Teruya & Hser, 2010; Nagin, Farrington, & Moffitt, 1995). Moreover, much research has been conducted to understand the criminal life course of juvenile delinquents as they transition into adulthood. Such research has ranged from understanding the relationship between mental health issues and offending (e.g., Silver, 2006) to the life course criminal behaviors of boys transitioning into adulthood whose parents were incarcerated (e.g., Murray & Farrington, 2005). Furthermore, a life course perspective has been suggested as among the best theoretical perspectives to apply to understanding drug use and its connection to continued offending (Hser et al., 2009).

1.2.1. Emerging adulthood

A relatively new proposition of the life course perspective introduced by Arnett (2000) is the need to understand a distinct period of the life course called *emerging adulthood*. This proposed distinct period of the life course is posited to have emerged in the second half of the twentieth century and applies to the approximate ages between 18 and 25 where individuals are not adolescents, yet not adults either. This period can even extend throughout the entire 20s, depending on the individual (Arnett, 2000). When individuals experience *emerging adulthood*, they are argued to face culture-specific challenges, such as distinct demographic, subjective, and identity exploration/formation issues not experienced by other age groups (Arnett, 2000). Particularly, cultures, such as the US, where adolescence is oftentimes extended due to high industrialization places individuals within this age-range in a precarious position of not being in a distinct, easily definable, category (e.g., child, teen, adult, etc.). Arnett (2000) further proposes that this period of the life course is characterized by the following five key features of: 1) *age of identity explorations*, 2) *age of instability*, 3) *self-focused age of life*, 4) *age of feeling in-between*, and 5) *age of possibilities*.

The first characteristic of the *age of identity explorations* refers to two components of identify development being love and work where individuals begin to experiment and experience each respective factor, ultimately forming a key part of their lifelong identity (Arnett, 2005). The second characteristic of the *age of instability* refers to the unpredictability often faced during this age range due to frequent changes in employment, romantic relationships, educational status, and even one's place of residence (Arnett, 2005). The third characteristic of the *self-focused*

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