



An examination of change in dynamic risk of offending over time among serious juvenile offenders☆



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ABSTRACT

Purpose: We examine whether and how much risk/need indicators change over time in a sample of serious adolescent offenders and whether changes in risk are related to self-reported and official record reports of offending in the year following assessment.

Methods: Growth curve and multilevel mixed-effects models are used to examine change through age 18 in a sample of 1354 serious adolescent offenders participating in the Pathways to Desistance Study.

Results: Three primary findings emerge: 1) Compared to the baseline assessment, overall risk/need scores decrease over time. 2) Risk/need does not change in a uniform sequence across domains and time; the form and rate of change differ by domain. 3) Risk/need indicators were related to later offending, with more recent indicators being more powerful for predicting rearrest.

Conclusions: The findings provide empirical support for recent efforts to incorporate routine risk/need assessment into juvenile justice practice. Repeated assessments are likely to identify fluctuations in areas of risk/need that can be used to inform case management and intervention efforts, even for serious offenders.

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Introduction

The expanding body of research on risk and protective factors related to juvenile criminal activity holds considerable promise for improving prevention and intervention efforts in this area (Loeber & Farrington, 1998). Identification of population-wide and developmental stage-related indicators of increased risk (risk markers; Kraemer et al., 1997) allows for more focused targeting of intervention resources. This information can ensure that services get to those adolescents who are most likely to benefit from them when they need them. The identification of risk factors, i.e., those indicators of increased risk that occur prior to—and whose alteration affect the likelihood of—criminal involvement (Kraemer et al., 1997), hold promise for improving the content of prevention and intervention programs. These identify the types of interventions that are most likely to have an impact, and therefore warrant development. Investigations of protective factors,

meanwhile, hold promise for enriching both identification and program content by uncovering a set of untapped factors that could mediate or moderate intervention and prevention efforts.

The juvenile justice system has a compelling interest in incorporating research on risk, need, and protective factors into its standard practice, since the success of juvenile justice efforts rests heavily on focusing appropriate resources on the “right” adolescent offenders. Policy makers and professionals in this area recognize diversion as a laudable goal; trying to “do no harm” by limiting juvenile justice system involvement with adolescents who pose no significant threat to public safety and whose development could be sidetracked by deeper penetration into the justice system. In addition, to be cost effective, these professionals work toward using the most intensive juvenile justice interventions with those offenders highly likely to do continued harm to the community. Finally, in an ideal world, the right adolescents would get the right services. The juvenile justice system would have adolescents and parents engaged in services that address and change the factors related to continued offending or promote the next positive developmental gain in that adolescent. Meeting these challenges all require sorting adolescents according to risks and needs.

Significant progress has been made over the last few decades to implement the ideas of risk, need, and protective factors into juvenile justice system operations. Researchers have developed valid, practical screening and assessment instruments – e.g., the Youth Level of Service/Case Management Inventory (YLS/CMI) (Hoge & Andrews, 2006) and the Structured Assessment of Violence Risk in Youth

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(SAVRY; Borum, Bartel, & Forth, 2006) – that have been widely endorsed by juvenile justice professionals (Vincent, Guy, & Grisso, 2012). Instruments like these gauge the risk of future criminal involvement using evidence-based indicators of an adolescent's likelihood to be re-arrested or to continue offending. The indicators include both fixed items such as the youth's age at first arrest, and potentially malleable aspects of life like the level of antisocial peer influence. These instruments are thus meant to identify adolescent offenders with a higher likelihood of future involvement in crime or violence and to provide leads about the types of factors that might be addressed to reduce the risk of future offending. Some instruments also identify protective factors, such as a supportive family, that could guide case management and make interventions more successful. (For a full review, see Vincent, Terry, & Maney, 2009).

This approach recognizes that a full conceptualization of current risk of reoffending has to distinguish and consider risk status and risk state (Mulvey & Lidz, 1995); much like conceptualizations of the fluctuation in any series of behaviors is composed of both random, interindividual effects and fixed, intraindividual effects. Future risk is determined by both pre-existing, static characteristics of the adolescent at the time of their involvement with the justice system, and changing, dynamic factors in their current and future lives. It recognizes that how an adolescent's life unfolds on certain dimensions might raise or lower their risk of future offending as measured at any given point in time. A current designation of an adolescent as "high risk" or "low risk" does not necessarily mean that a future assessment will produce the same conclusion; aspects of their lives may change for better or worse.

Thus while it seems apparent that assessments should consider dynamic factors to help improve accuracy (a point that remains in contention; see Douglas & Skeem, 2005), it also seems that these assessments have a limited "shelf life." The practical implication of this more dynamic view of risk for future offending is that adolescents need to be reassessed periodically while under supervision of the court. To work effectively over time with an adolescent at high risk for reoffending, juvenile justice professionals need to know which dynamic risk factors have changed and where concurrent case management and intervention efforts should be focused to reduce ongoing risk.

While this approach to risk management seems logical and potentially useful, the eventual payoff from integrating ongoing risk assessment in to juvenile justice practice is still far from clear. There are numerous assumptions and related issues that need to be addressed before we have a blueprint for implementing this highly regarded reform. We do not yet know, for example, how much dynamic risk factors actually change over time, or to what extent these changes are related to persistent offending. Some work among adults has shown that the inclusion of dynamic risk improves the predictive validity of recidivism models, which include only static items to predict recidivism (Brown, St. Amand, & Zamble, 2009; Jones, Brown, & Zamble, 2010).

With respect to juvenile offenders, empirical work on changes in dynamic risk factors is very sparse (Bechtel, Lowenkamp, & Latessa, 2007). However, one might expect that change occurs at different rates among juvenile as compared to adult offenders given the distinctive quality of adolescence as a period of social, cognitive and emotional development (Scott & Steinberg, 2008). A comparative report of YLS/CMI scores for a single youth demonstrated change in both the overall and subscale scores over a six-month period (Hoge & Andrews, 2004). Others have shown that consideration of dynamic risk factors improves the overall performance of risk assessment instruments with juvenile offenders (Vincent, Perrault, Guy, & Gershenson, 2012), and another has shown that interventions targeted to identified dynamic risk factors reduce re-arrest (Vieira, Skilling, & Peterson-Badali, 2009). Knowing more about these processes, however, is at the heart of making juvenile justice interventions more effective.

In an effort to fill these notable gaps in the literature, the current study uses data from the Pathways to Desistance Study to examine patterns of change in risk/need indicators over time. The analyses address

two major questions. First, we consider whether and how much risk/need indicators change over time in a sample of serious adolescent offenders. Second, we assess whether any changes in risk are related to offending. These straightforward questions are at the core of arguments for the utility of using dynamic risk assessment strategies. They have, however, never been examined with longitudinal data in a sample of serious juvenile offenders (the adolescents for whom monitoring of dynamic changes could have the most payoff; Lipsey, 2009).

Methods

The data analyzed here come from the Pathways to Desistance project ("Pathways"). The Pathways study is a large, longitudinal study of serious adolescent offenders from Maricopa County, Arizona, and Philadelphia County, Pennsylvania. The purpose of the study is to examine the mechanisms that influence the ending of antisocial activity within a group of serious adolescent offenders who are making the transition from adolescence into early adulthood (see Mulvey et al., 2004). Given the large amount of reduction in offending that occurs in mid to late adolescence (Laub & Sampson, 2001), this sample provides a valuable opportunity to examine how shifts in risk/need might be related to criminal involvement.

Sample

Across both sites, 1354 youth were enrolled into the Pathways study between November, 2000 and January, 2003. Enrollment criteria required potential participants to be 14 through 17 years of age (at the time of the study index offense) and found guilty of a serious offense (overwhelmingly felony offenses, with a few exceptions for less serious property offenses, misdemeanor sexual assault, or misdemeanor weapons offenses). Enrollment of males was limited to 15% drug offenders to maintain a heterogeneous sample of serious offenders. However, all females and all youth whose cases were being considered for trial in the adult system were approached if they met the age and adjudicated crime requirements. Additional details regarding the recruitment procedures and sample characteristics can be found elsewhere (see Schubert et al., 2004). The study was reviewed and approved by the institutional review boards of the University of Pittsburgh (the study coordinating center), Arizona State University, and Temple University (data collection sites).

Interviews

After providing informed consent, youth enrolled in the Pathways study completed a baseline interview at the point of enrollment into the study and subsequent "time point" interviews at 6-month intervals for the first three years and yearly thereafter through seven years. These interviews collected information on the adolescents' behavior and life experiences during the prior six months or past year. Specifically, the time-point interviews assessed status and change across multiple domains, such as individual functioning, psychosocial development and attitudes, family and community context, and relationships. A portion of this interview used a life calendar approach (Caspi et al., 1996; Horney, Osgood, & Marshall, 1995) to capture the nature, number, and timing of important changes in the life circumstances of these youth, one of the major goals of the study. On average, these interviews took two hours to complete, and participants were paid for their participation. Over the course of the study, retention rates were high, with an average of 90% of research participants interviewed at each point.

All interviews were completed using a computer-assisted format and were conducted in a facility, the participant's home, or a public place (e.g., local library). To encourage honesty, attempts were made to conduct the interview out of the hearing range of other individuals. If other individuals were within hearing distance, respondents were given the option to enter their responses on a keypad without

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