

Youth who fail to envision future commit more crimes according to study

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Dr. Alex Piquero's latest study shows that having little hope for the future leads to more offending over time.

In a UT Dallas study involving serious youth offenders, the answer to one open-ended question predicted the teenagers' offending patterns for the next seven years: "How long do you think you'll live?"

According to the study, having little hope for the future encourages

offending over time.

Author Dr. Alex Piquero said the study found those who don't view a very long life ahead of them offend at very high rates and commit more serious offenses, while those who believe they're going to die much later in life offend much less.

"In a lot of distressed communities and for a lot of offenders, they don't see a future," said Piquero, Ashbel Smith Professor of criminology at UT Dallas. "They think, 'Why do I have to go to school? I'm not going to make it past 21.' And in many of our interviews with these kids, they basically said, 'I'm not going to make it until next week, so why would I even care?'"

The youths' perceptions about how long they would live also impacted how they interpreted the consequences of offending, according to the study.

Teens who anticipated early death were more likely to focus on "the here and the now," Piquero said. They're impulsive; they don't think about the risks of their behavior.

The paper, published online in *Justice Quarterly* on March 27, used data from a seven-year study of serious youth offenders to examine what has been a relatively uncharted area of empirical research.

Piquero's research began by asking the offenders—approximately 16 years old—their thoughts on when they would die. Their answers ranged from late teens to more than 100 years old, Piquero said.

Researchers followed up with the sample of serious adolescent offenders seven years later, and they self-reported their offending. Those who said they would live longer were more likely to have controlled their

impulses.

Piquero said when people in the overall population envision themselves living long lives, they do things that will help them get to that point: they diet, work out, avoid drugs.

"You understand those long-term consequences," Piquero said. "Some kids get that. Other kids have yet to do so."

If youths can envision a longer-term future, they can make better decisions and crime can be reduced, Piquero said. The key is figuring out why some kids have fatalistic views of the future and what it will take to get them to understand long-term consequences. It's important to not "lump together" all youth offenders, Piquero added, because their views of the world vary.

The researcher said the study goes hand-in-hand with President Barack Obama's My Brother's Keeper initiative, a new effort to bolster the lives of [young men](#). The initiative calls for foundations and companies to collaborate to keep young men in school and out of the criminal justice system.

Piquero said the findings can be used to determine how to get these youths to see a life ahead of them and think about what they should do to prepare for that life. If you get them to see a future, it affects how they act now and how they view the world around them now, Piquero said.

"How do we get them to think about a long future?" Piquero asked. "We have to tell them there are rewards for educational and employment investments down the road. The rewards will be fruitful. They'll take some hard work, and they'll take some time, but you can attain those kinds of things."

How the Study Differs from Prior Research on the Topic

The analysis considered possible trends in anticipated early death, including looking at race, gender and adverse neighborhood conditions.

The study examined the association between perceptions of expected [early death](#) and then tracked offending over the next seven years.

The study used a sample of serious youthful offenders from two large cities.

More information: The complete study is available online:
www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/17445019.2014.963961

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