

# Processing arrested juveniles as adults has small effect on criminal recidivism, study finds

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Researchers at the University of Pennsylvania have found a three to five percent reduction in the probability of criminal recidivism among a sample of juveniles arrested for felony drug offenses, some of whom were processed as adults due to their age at the time of their arrests.

In a study published in the *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, Charles Loeffler, an assistant professor of criminology in the School of Arts & Sciences, and Ben Grunwald, a doctoral candidate in the [criminology](#) department, analyzed the effect of processing juveniles as adults using a regression discontinuity design.

The study, titled "Processed as an Adult: A Regression Discontinuity Estimate of the Crime Effects of Charging Nontransfer Juveniles as Adults," estimated the effect of the juvenile and adult justice systems on recidivism for non-transfer-eligible [juvenile offenders](#) by comparing the four year re-offending rates of juveniles arrested for drug distribution just a few weeks before and after they reached adulthood.

The results suggested that processing these juveniles as adults slightly reduced the probability of recidivism. Based on the rapid onset and limited change in size of the effects over a four-year follow-up and the concentration of the effects within a sub-group having the lowest risk of incarceration. The researchers attributed this finding to a combination of enhanced deterrence and incapacitation in the adult [justice system](#).

"These results suggest that processing juveniles in the adult system may not uniformly increase offending, as many scholars have thought, and may actually reduce offending in some circumstances," Loeffler said.

The study examined the recidivism of felony drug offenders arrested a few weeks before their 17th birthday who were processed in the [juvenile justice system](#) and those arrested just a few weeks after their 17th birthday who were processed in the adult [criminal justice system](#).

Past studies have found that serious juvenile offenders transferred into the adult system as part of automatic, presumptive or discretionary transfer mechanisms re-offend much more often than similar juvenile offenders retained in the juvenile system. Such findings have led scholars and policymakers to conclude that exposing youth to the adult justice system exacerbates criminal offending.

However, Loeffler said that the existing empirical literature is primarily focused on the most serious or frequent juvenile offenders. There is relatively little information on the effects of processing more typical juveniles in the adult system. Similarly, the existing literature has used research designs that make it difficult to separate the effects of processing juveniles as adults from pre-existing differences in the risk of recidivism between juveniles who are processed in the two different legal systems.

The results of Loeffler and Grunwald's study, which differed from some of the early empirical literature examining the effects of processing juveniles as [adults](#), adds to a growing number of studies observing that offending among older [juveniles](#) is relatively insensitive to the exact legal system in which they are prosecuted. The researchers attributed this divergence between earlier and newer studies to both the samples of offenders examined and the estimation strategies employed.

**More information:** "Processed as an Adult: A Regression Discontinuity Estimate of the Crime Effects of Charging Nontransfer Juveniles as Adults Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency." 0022427815581858, first published on June 4, 2015 [DOI: 10.1177/0022427815581858](https://doi.org/10.1177/0022427815581858)

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