

Book traces rough transition for juvenile offenders as they become adults

June 13 2017, by Stan Paul

What are the prospects for young men and women who grow up in and then age out of the juvenile justice system?

Research and the media paint a bleak picture for those whose formative adolescent years have been intertwined with incarceration and who may continue to traverse the revolving door of probation, detention and corrections into their adult lives.

Using in-depth interviews, UCLA social welfare professor Laura Abrams and Diane Terry, a senior research associate at Loyola Marymount College's Psychology Applied Research Center, present a more nuanced portrait of life after juvie in their new book, "Everyday Desistance: The Transition to Adulthood Among Formerly Incarcerated Youth" (Rutgers University Press).

Desistance is often defined as "the movement toward the complete termination of offending." In their study, the authors looked more closely at this process by collecting firsthand stories and insights from young adults who experienced it.

Abrams and Terry, who earned her M.S.W. and Ph.D. degrees at the UCLA Luskin School of Public Affairs, interviewed 25 men and women, ages 18-25, in Los Angeles who aged out of the [juvenile justice](#) system. Some interviews spanned numerous years so that the researchers could understand their subjects' transition to "emerging adults" and obtain a picture of participants' "everyday" experiences after growing up

in the juvenile justice system.

The researchers said that they looked at those whose lives lie between the extreme narratives that predict failure or success against all odds. They focused on the challenges and opportunities facing those who neither gave up on their goals nor found a simple, straightforward pathway to success.

"Criminal desistance is not an end goal; it is a process. And it is certainly not linear," Abrams said. The book is the culmination of a decade of Abrams' work on juvenile reentry and desistance—research she started upon arriving at UCLA in 2006.

The book covers very different points of view and experiences of men and women in the juvenile justice system.

"The young women have a unique story, and much of their post-incarceration lives revolve around finding and experiencing a sense of 'home' that they didn't have in their [youth](#)," Abrams said.

One chapter, "You Can Run but You Can't Hide," points out the dangers that persist when youth transitioning to adulthood return to their old neighborhoods. Those youths said that they feel marked by their histories.

"We're all marked. Forever. All of us. No matter how much the transformation," said a young man named Oscar, whose story is featured prominently in the book.

Abrams and Terry said that they count this discovery as one of the most important lessons they learned from the interviews. "From the young men's world view, being marked was partially related to the stigma from appearance, age and race, but was also tied to navigating the urban

environments of Los Angeles as former gang members, drug dealers and those whom law enforcement viewed as criminals," Abrams said.

Abrams and Terry previously wrote a paper based on these interviews, "You Can Run But You Can't Hide": How Formerly Incarcerated Young Men Navigate Neighborhood Risks," published in the journal *Children and Youth Services Review*. The researchers discussed how young men, including those with old gang ties, contend with everyday risks and how they devise complex survival strategies in high-adversity environments.

Abrams and Terry said that research from fields ranging from criminology to biology informed their newest study. But it was the insights gathered from more than 70 interviews that helped them understand the factors that may affect criminal desistance—age, maturity, social bonds, internal motivation and neighborhood conditions, among others.

"Although we fully acknowledge that the juvenile justice system continues to create a group of youth who are disadvantaged as they enter adulthood, we contend that these young men and women are a great deal more than their bleak odds," the authors wrote. They also note that, as juveniles age out of the system and are suddenly deemed adults left to their own devices, they are thrust into adulthood and responsibility earlier than their peers who may have access to more social and economic resources.

"Transitioning to adulthood with little support and an incarcerated past is hard," Abrams said. "There is a lot of trauma to contend with. Most of the youth were struggling with just daily needs. Their lives changed rapidly and unpredictably."

The authors recognize the limitations of social safety nets in providing youth with everything needed to overcome barriers to criminal

desistance. They call for specific policies for this group, similar to those that exist for former foster youth.

"As we listened to the narratives of our participants and watched their adult lives unfold, we were amazed at the ingenuity and resilience of these [young men](#) and women to navigate immense obstacles they faced," Abrams said. "In the end, their stories taught us that all young people have the capacity to reach beyond the labels assigned to them."

More information: Laura S. Abrams et al. "You can run but you can't hide": How formerly incarcerated young men navigate neighborhood risks, *Children and Youth Services Review* (2014). [DOI: 10.1016/j.chidyouth.2014.03.012](#)

Provided by University of California, Los Angeles

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