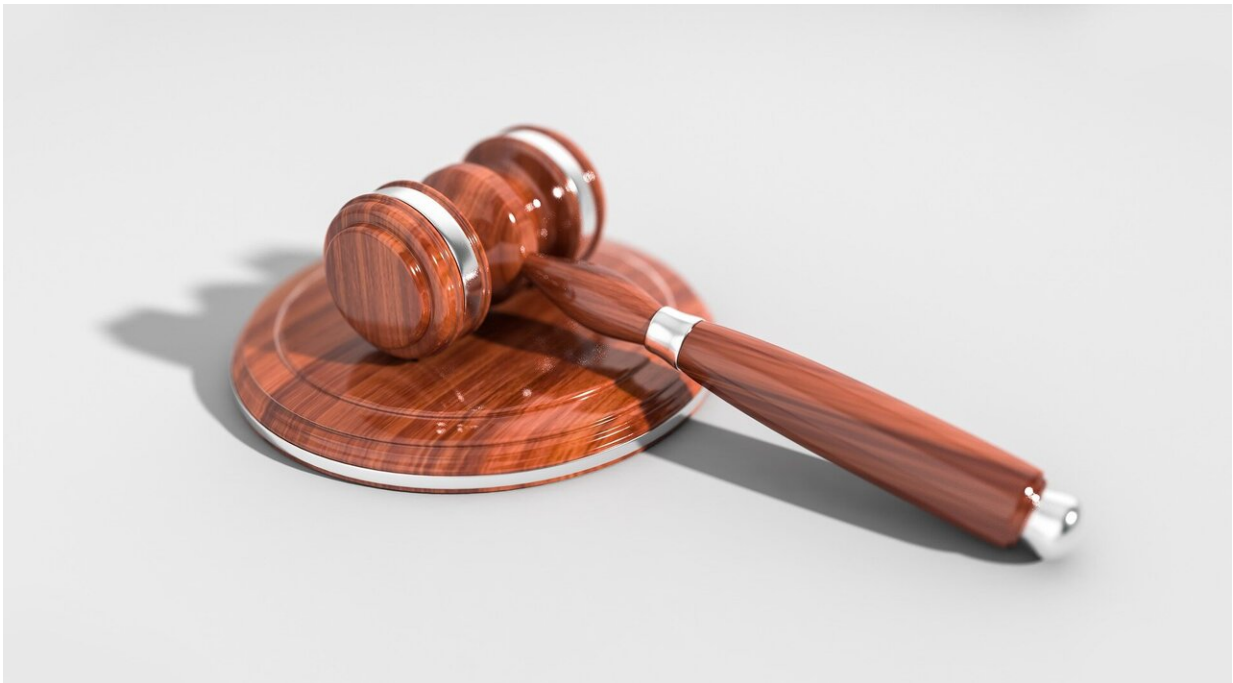


Juvenile incarceration has mixed effects on future convictions

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Harsh prison sentences for juvenile crimes do not reduce the probability of conviction for violent crimes as an adult, and actually increase the propensity for conviction of drug-related crimes, finds a new study by economists at UC Riverside and the University of Louisiana. Harsh juvenile sentences do reduce the likelihood of conviction for property crimes as an adult. But the increase in drug-related crimes cancels out

any benefit harsh sentences might offer, researchers found.

"Juvenile incarceration is a double-edged sword which deters future property crimes but makes drug convictions more likely in adulthood. Thus, it's hard to make firm policy recommendations about sentencing," said first author Ozkan Eren, a professor of economics at UC Riverside. "That said, reducing time spent in prison combined with incorporating better rehabilitation programs into nonincarceration punishment may produce welfare-improving outcomes for convicted juveniles."

Eren and Naci Mocan at the University of Louisiana obtained special permission to view juvenile conviction records from the Louisiana Department of Public Safety and Corrections, Youth Services, Office of Juvenile Justice and reviewed records from the Louisiana Department of Public Safety and Corrections, Adult Services from 1996-2012. Each case record included demographic information about the juvenile or adult, the exact statute offense committed, and details about convictions and sentencing.

To measure recidivism, the researchers focused on juvenile case files from 1996 to 2004. This corresponded to the cohorts born between 1979 and 1987 and the researchers followed them until each one reached 25, observing their criminal conviction activity as young adults. All juveniles included in the study had been randomly assigned to a judge.

The average juvenile incarceration rate was about 25%, with an average age at conviction of 15 years old. Property and drug-related juvenile offenses comprised half of all juvenile convictions. As adults, about 39% of juvenile delinquents were convicted of another crime by age 25. Adults who had been incarcerated as juveniles had a 54.7% conviction rate. Those who had received probation or punishment other than incarceration as juveniles had a much lower conviction rate— 33.5%.

Eren and Mocan found that juvenile incarceration overall had basically no effect on adult crime. They found, however, that incarceration influenced the types of crimes for which adults were convicted. While incarceration as juveniles had no effect on adult convictions for [violent crimes](#), it reduced the likelihood of property crimes and increased the probability of drug convictions by 28%.

"In summary, juvenile incarceration, triggered by exposure to a harsher juvenile judge, has a deterrent effect on adult property crime conviction, a positive impact on [conviction](#) from a drug offense as an adult, and no effect on adult violent crime," the authors write.

The authors suggest a reason for these outcomes is that, during the period studied, Louisiana offered well-monitored, well-structured treatment programs for the incarcerated. Incarcerated juveniles had to participate in case-specific services and programs with quarterly evaluations of their rehabilitation by professional caseworkers. These plans included vocational training, which could lead to better job prospects and reduced propensity to commit property crimes.

But life in prison took an emotional toll. Of the individuals later convicted as adults for drug-related offenses, 95% received suspended sentences or probation, indicating that the overwhelming majority of convictions were for drug use rather than selling. The authors suggest that the stress and stigma of incarceration early in life contributed to substance abuse.

They also noted that [incarceration](#) had a detrimental impact on high school completion in earlier cohorts, but it had no impact on later cohorts. This is arguably because the school reforms Louisiana implemented in the early 2000s made it more difficult to obtain a high school diploma. That led to a decline in the graduation rate of the non-incarcerated population, while not altering the already-low graduation

rate of those who are incarcerated.

The study concludes that less prison time—non-carceral options such as probation, or shorter sentences— and better rehabilitation programs would maintain or improve current recidivism rates and possibly make a big reduction in drug-related crimes by reducing emotional distress.

The paper, "Juvenile punishment, high school graduation, and adult [crime](#): evidence from idiosyncratic judge harshness," is published in the *Review of Economics and Statistics*.

More information: Ozkan Eren et al. Juvenile Punishment, High School Graduation, and Adult Crime: Evidence from Idiosyncratic Judge Harshness, *The Review of Economics and Statistics* (2019). [DOI: 10.1162/rest_a_00872](#)

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