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## Previously institutionalized youths on the road to adulthood

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## SUMMARY

### **Previously institutionalized youths on the road to adulthood A longitudinal study on employment and crime**

In the Netherlands, over 4,000 youths are institutionalized in juvenile justice or youth care institutions every year because there are serious concerns about their behavior and development. In general, these youths are characterized by troubled backgrounds: they grew up in adverse family situations, show poor school performance, suffer from psychological problems, and exhibit serious behavioral problems and more often than not (serious) delinquency. When previously institutionalized youths begin to make the transition into adulthood, they may find that because of their vulnerable background, they face difficulties adapting to conventional adult social roles. These youths especially face challenges in making a successful transition to one of the most important adult life domains: employment. This is unfortunate, as employment might foster the adoption of a conventional lifestyle and thereby prevent them from developing a persistent criminal career.

As of yet, it is largely unknown to what extent previously institutionalized youths are able to make a successful transition into adulthood, and what role employment and criminal behavior play in their lives. Therefore, this dissertation aimed to examine how previously institutionalized youths fare on the road to adulthood, with a special focus on their experiences in the labor market. The goal of this dissertation was to provide insight into the role of employment and crime in the (adult) lives of these vulnerable youths. Therefore, studying a sample of previously institutionalized men and women, this dissertation aimed to examine (1) the effect of employment on offending (chapters 2 and 3), (2) the effects of conviction and incarceration on employment chances (chapter 4), and (3) the extent to which employment and crime influence adult life adjustment (chapter 5).

## THE 17UP STUDY

In order to examine the relationship between the employment careers and criminal careers of previously institutionalized youths, and to shed light on the adult outcomes of these youths, data from the 17Up study was used. The sample of the 17Up study consists of boys and girls (N=540) who were institutionalized in a Dutch juvenile justice institution in the 1990s when they were 15 years old on average.

Individual level, officially registered data on convictions and incarceration as well as employment and income support, were collected up to age 32. The officially registered data was complemented with self-report data collected in face-to-face interviews when subjects were on average almost 35 years old. Furthermore, rich information on background characteristics retrieved from treatment files that were constructed during the juveniles' stay in the institution was available.

By studying this sample of previously institutionalized youths, this dissertation aimed to contribute to the existing body of research on the association between employment and crime by testing a number of theories addressing the work-crime relationship using longitudinal data, for both men and women, and in the Dutch context.

## THE PROBLEMATIC LIVES OF PREVIOUSLY INSTITUTIONALIZED YOUTHS

The previously institutionalized men and women in the sample under study are characterized by a vulnerable background. In general, they grew up in adverse family situations, they were often victimized and suffered from psychological problems. Moreover, their intelligence and educational level was generally low, and they displayed serious behavioral problems. Furthermore, the larger part of the sample had had contact with the juvenile justice system during adolescence. Prior to age 18, over 80 percent of the boys and over half of the girls were convicted of a serious offense at least once, with conviction frequency being highest for boys.

A large part of these juveniles continued their criminal career into adulthood. Chapters 2, 3 and 4 showed that, during the observation period, from ages 18 to 32, over three quarters of the men and over 40 percent of the women were (re)convicted of a serious offense at least once, again, men on average were (re)convicted more frequently than women. In addition, more than half of the men and almost one fifth of the women were incarcerated at some point between ages 18 and 32. For both men and women, participation in criminal behavior decreased with age.

Furthermore, the majority of men and women were employed at some point between ages 18 and 32. Still, 15 percent of the sample was unemployed during the entire observation period. The employment careers of respondents who were employed at some point were highly unstable; both men and women worked several short-lived jobs and experienced multiple spells of unemployment. All in all, employment participation in this sample was much lower compared to the general Dutch population. Unsurprisingly, therefore, a large part of the sample received income support at some point during the observation period, women more often receiving financial support than men.

Looking at the adult outcomes of previously institutionalized youths, chapter 5, in which the sample was followed up to an average age of 35, demonstrated that a large part of them did not turn out well, at least not to conventional standards. Next to the high unemployment rate, the lives of formerly institutionalized men and women are also characterized by difficulties in multiple other adult life domains – they have health problems, struggle with mental health issues, and have to deal with alcohol or drug abuse. Some are incarcerated or institutionalized in mental health facilities. For some men and women, history repeats itself, in the sense that their own children are placed under the care of the Child Protection Board because they were deemed unable to take care of them. In general, previously institutionalized men show poorer adult outcomes than women.

## THE EFFECTS OF EMPLOYMENT ON CRIME

The first aim of this dissertation was to examine the effect of employment on offending. Although several theories assume that employment can contribute to desistance from crime, it is also argued that employment is associated with lower levels of offending because some individuals possess certain characteristics that increase the likelihood to desist from crime as well the likelihood to be successful in conventional life domains such as in the labor market.

In chapter 2, the effects of employment, employment duration, and unemployment duration on serious offending were examined, while controlling for personal and background characteristics. By doing so, this chapter investigated whether a causal relationship between employment and criminal behavior exists, and to what extent instantaneous and gradual effects are at play in the relationship between employment and crime. This study showed that employment is associated with a reduction in the number of convictions for serious offenses, for both previously institutionalized men and women, over and above the effects of stable and dynamic controls. Those who are employed show a decrease in their serious offending behavior. Besides an instantaneous effect of employment on offending, for men, employment has a gradual negative effect on crime as well, as being employed for multiple consecutive years has an additional negative effect on the number of convictions for serious offenses. Furthermore, unemployment duration is associated with an increase in offending for women, whereas for men, a longer unemployment duration slightly decreases the number of convictions.

Furthermore, chapter 3 examined the effects of employment and different types of income support (unemployment benefits, public assistance and disability benefits) on different types of offending. By studying both the effects of employment and income support, and by distinguishing between serious, property, and violent offending, the extent to which income or other non-monetary aspects of employment are important in reducing offending could be examined. Similar to chapter 2, this part of the study showed that for both men and women, employment is associated with a significantly lower conviction frequency. Furthermore, receiving income support is correlated with a decrease in serious offending for men, while associated with a marginal increase in offending for women. Distinguishing between three different types of income support demonstrated that the positive effect of receiving income support on crime for women was driven by receiving disability benefits. Finally, when looking at property and violent offending, employment lowered the chance of being convicted of a property crime and of a violent crime for both men and women. Receiving income support is associated with a lower probability of property crime, but only for men, while receiving benefits is unrelated to violent offending for both men and women. In sum, while both men and women who are employed show a decrease in their conviction rate, the effects of income support on crime differ for men and women, as receiving benefits is associated with reduced offending for males, but with increased offending for females.

What do these results mean for theories about employment and crime? Both chapters 2 and 3 point to a causal longitudinal association between employment and serious offending. Although there are selection effects at play, being employed is associated with lower levels of offending for previously institutionalized men and women, over and above the effects of stable individual characteristics that are thought to increase both the risk of crime and unemployment. Thus, even after controlling for selection effects, employment is associated with a decrease in offending. Therefore, the findings from these chapters particularly lend support for theories that predict a causal effect of employment on offending. Results indicate that both the monetary benefits associated with being employed, as well as the non-monetary aspects of work, might explain the relationship between employment and reduced offending.

To begin with, the findings are in line with expectations based on theories emphasizing the financial motivation for crime. According to economic and strain theories, employment and income support would reduce offending, since they both generate a legitimate income. Findings showed that formerly institutionalized men and women accrued fewer convictions

in the years that they are employed, which might indicate that the financial benefits that employment provides reduce the financial motivation for crime. Furthermore, for men, receiving income support is associated with a lower offending rate as well. Moreover, employment and income support were found to have stronger effects on property than on violent offending. These findings thus suggest that crime is (at least partly) financially motivated.

However, the relationship between receiving an income and offending seems to be more complex for women than for men, as for women receiving benefits, and disability benefits in particular, is associated with an increase in offending. In the high-risk sample under study, women seem often eligible for disability benefits due to psychiatric problems. Although women may also profit from financial support, receiving benefits may thus simultaneously signal psychological conditions that in turn prevent them from desisting. Furthermore, it might be that women experience financial difficulties to a larger degree than men, since many of the women have to take care of their under-aged children, while men less often have or live up to parental obligations.

Whereas the negative effect of employment on offending can be interpreted as resulting from the financial benefits that employment provides, the lower offending rate can also be explained by the non-monetary aspects that are associated with being employed, such as the experience of social control and structure in daily routines. Therefore, the findings from chapters 2 and 3 are also in line with control theories. Chapter 3 showed a larger effect of employment on offending than of income support on offending, indicating that more than merely receiving an income, the non-monetary aspects of work such as social control are important in desisting from crime as well. Furthermore, employment affects serious offending, as well as property and violent offending separately. Since many violent offenses are not committed for direct financial gain, this too points to the importance of social control in refraining from criminal behavior.

In addition, chapter 2 demonstrated that over and above the negative effect of employment on offending, stable employment further decreased the conviction frequency of previously institutionalized young adults. This too supports control theories that state that especially a good, stable job has the ability to contribute to desistance, because it offers the opportunity to invest in social capital and to tighten the bond to conventional society. As a result, the employed individual is increasingly less willing to put his or her job at stake by committing crime, and work thereby gradually fosters the adoption of a conventional, non-criminal lifestyle.

However, continuous employment was found to affect criminal behavior only for men. This might indicate that, at least in this high-risk sample, the meaning of work differs for men and women. Since women, especially those who are low-skilled, more often than men work part time and combine their work with other conventional social roles such as being a mother, the importance and meaning of work might be different for women compared to men.

Furthermore, chapter 2 demonstrated that a longer duration of unemployment is related to an increase in offending, at least for women. However, for men, a longer unemployment spell is associated with a small decrease in offending. It might be that a longer duration of unemployment is related to an increase in offending for women, because for them, it causes a situation of chronic financial strain to a larger extent than for men since, as mentioned above, women more often have parental obligations. Furthermore, it might be that unemployed high-risk men more often than women are living in secured settings such as

treatment centers for alcohol and drug addictions, providing more social control and thereby reducing the opportunities to commit crimes.

In sum, studying the relationship between employment and crime longitudinally demonstrated that, even though labor market participation is low in the sample under study, employment can be of great importance for previously institutionalized youths in helping them adopt a conventional, non-criminal lifestyle. Both the financial benefits as well as the social control associated with being employment appear to contribute to desistance from crime.

## THE EFFECTS OF CONVICTION AND INCARCERATION ON EMPLOYMENT CHANCES

As discussed above, employment can contribute to desistance from crime. However, especially previously institutionalized youths are, due to their troubled background or due to consequences of their delinquent behavior, at risk of experiencing problems entering the labor market and as a result experience unemployment. Moreover, as shown earlier, the majority of these youths engages in criminal behavior in adulthood. Both a history of unemployment and a criminal background are thought to bring about difficulties finding and keeping employment. To shed light on the employment prospects of formerly institutionalized youths, the second aim of this dissertation was to examine to what extent the already limited employment prospects of these youths are further damaged by the official reactions to crime, such as conviction and incarceration. Chapter 4 therefore examined the effects of a history of unemployment, conviction, and incarceration on the probability of being employed.

The findings from chapter 4 indicated that for men, a criminal background does not affect employment prospects when their history of unemployment is taken into account. For men, unemployment in the previous year, the number of unemployment spells, and a longer duration of unemployment are associated with a lower employment probability. When unemployment history is taken into account, no additional detrimental effects of convictions and incarceration, neither incarceration in the previous year, incarceration spells nor duration, are found.

Results showed that for women, a criminal record does affect employment chances in addition to the detrimental effects of unemployment. Significant negative effects of convictions on employment chances in the subsequent year were found, next to negative effects of a history of unemployment. Similar as for men, a history of incarceration has no additional negative effect on employment probability. For women, being unemployed in the previous year and the number of prior unemployment spells decrease the probability of employment in the subsequent year, whereas unemployment duration has no significant effect on the likelihood of being employed.

The results from chapter 4 underline the detrimental effects of unemployment history on the employment chances of previously institutionalized youths, and are therefore in line with theories from labor economics. To begin with, the findings support signaling theory, which states that unemployment history damages future employment chances due to the negative signal it constitutes. Not only experiencing unemployment per se, but also experiencing multiple unemployment spells and experiencing a prolonged spell of unemployment exert a negative effect on employment. This indicates that gaps in ones work history may signal

negative worker characteristics to potential employers, and the more and longer the unemployment spells, the stronger this negative signal, thereby further decreasing the chance of being hired.

In addition, as was expected based on human capital theory, particularly longer spells of unemployment decrease employment chances, especially for men. During a prolonged spell of unemployment, vulnerable youths are not only unable to invest in human capital, but their existing skills also erode. Their lack of human capital makes formerly institutionalized youths less attractive job candidates.

Taken together, experiencing unemployment damages the future employment outcomes of previously institutionalized young adults. When the detrimental effects of unemployment are taken into account, criminal history only affects the employment chances for previously institutionalized women. Therefore, the findings of chapter 4 support labeling theory, which states that people who have had contact with the criminal justice system are publicly labeled as deviant and as a result are viewed as undesirable job candidates by employers, only for women. This suggests that criminal behavior yields more stigma for women than for men. As fewer women than men engage in crime, the women who do commit crimes might be judged more harshly. In addition, occupational segregation by gender might also offer an explanation for the observed gender differences. Low-skilled women in general work in sectors such as service and retail, whereas low-skilled men apply for jobs in sectors such as construction and manufacturing. Given that the typical female jobs often concern contact with, for example, children or customers or handling cash, the negative characteristics associated with a criminal label can be a reason not to hire a woman with a criminal record. In contrast, in the industries where men work, a criminal record might not necessarily be a bad signal.

The Netherlands is characterized by a less punitive penal climate than Anglo-Saxon countries such as the US, where most prior research was carried out. This difference in societal context can help to explain why in this thesis, as opposed to earlier studies, little evidence for labeling effects was found. In the Netherlands, background screening is regulated by the government. As a result it is more difficult to get access to criminal records for employers in the Netherlands, as opposed to the US where employers can turn to private companies to perform background checks on potential employees. In the Netherlands, previously institutionalized young adults might therefore experience less stigmatization because of their criminal record. Moreover, prison spells in the Netherlands are in general short and more focused on rehabilitation by offering possibilities to participate in work programs and reintegration projects. Therefore, inmates face less human capital deterioration, and possibly even have opportunities to increase their human capital while incarcerated.

In sum, the employment prospects of previously institutionalized youths seem to be severely compromised to begin with, and the negative signal of prior unemployment and the lack of human capital further damages their employment outcomes, more so than a criminal record or history of incarceration.

## THE EFFECTS OF EMPLOYMENT AND CRIME ON ADULT LIFE ADJUSTMENT

The third and final aim of this thesis was to shed light on the adult outcomes of previously institutionalized youths when they are well into their thirties. Therefore, chapter 5 examined

to what extent employment history and criminal history influence these youths' level of adult life adjustment, a measure comprising several adult life domains including accommodation, family formation, health, alcohol use, and substance use.

As described earlier, chapter 5 of this dissertation demonstrated that, when previously institutionalized youths are on average 35 years old, a large part of them is experiencing difficulties in adult life domains. Yet, vulnerable youths are not predetermined to end up doing poorly. The problematic background that is characteristic of previously institutionalized youths does not necessarily predispose them to negative outcomes in the future, as most of the personal and background characteristics, except for academic failure, are not significantly related to the level of adult life adjustment. However, a higher level of involvement in criminal behavior in adulthood is associated with more difficulties in conventional adult life domains, whereas employment is associated with better adult outcomes.

The findings are therefore not in line with static theories that predict that certain negative individual characteristics cause difficulties in multiple life domains throughout the life course. On the contrary, chapter 5 demonstrated that change is possible in the lives of previously institutionalized youths. As was expected based on life course theories, ties to social institutions such as employment can act as a turning point and can thereby contribute to positive adult outcomes for vulnerable youths. As work appears to facilitate transitions in other life domains, the ones that manage to make a successful transition to the labor market put themselves in an upward trajectory resulting in better outcomes in adulthood.

However, adult outcomes are worse for those whose criminal career continues into adulthood. Thus, while ties to social institutions such as employment can bring about positive change in the life course, continued involvement in crime worsens the prospects of vulnerable youths, making it increasingly more difficult to connect to conventional life domains. The process of cumulative disadvantage due to continued criminal behavior might especially be at play for men, as they show poorer outcomes in adulthood than women.

In conclusion, this study demonstrated that previously institutionalized youths often experience difficulties adapting to conventional life domains. Employment can be of great importance in the lives of these men and women, as it contributes to positive outcomes in adulthood, not only in terms of an adult life without crime, but also by promoting life success in general.

## CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This dissertation demonstrated that for previously institutionalized youths, the road to adulthood is a difficult one. A considerable number of the men and women struggle to find their way in the labor market. Some seem to try, but fail to transition into steady employment, dropping in and out of employment and experiencing several unemployment spells. Others appear to miss the boat already early in adulthood and are compelled into chronic unemployment, possibly due to addiction or mental health problems. Moreover, the majority of the vulnerable youths get convicted in adulthood, and although involvement in criminal behavior decreases with age, this does not mean they end up doing well. Previously institutionalized youths experience difficulties in several adult life domains when they are well into their thirties.

Although previously institutionalized youths experience serious difficulties in the labor market, employment can still be of great importance for a successful transition to adulthood. For those men and women who are able to find and keep a job, the knife cuts both ways as employment reduces criminal activity, but also improves future employment prospects and overall life success. Therefore, a successful and lasting transition to the labor market early in adulthood is crucial for vulnerable youths. Interventions for institutionalized youths, during their stay in an institution, but also after institutionalization, should therefore be focused on improving their labor market position. Efforts should be directed not only at helping previously institutionalized youths find a job, but also at helping them to stay employed. Evidence based interventions that assist vulnerable youths as they transition to adulthood via participation in the labor market are thus essential to promote well-being and positive adult outcomes of youths who leave an institution.