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## Previously institutionalized youths on the road to adulthood

Verbruggen, J.

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## 6 | GENERAL DISCUSSION

*How did the lives of Ellen, Ray, James, and Regina, described at the beginning of this dissertation, turn out?<sup>1</sup> When Ellen left the institution, she got a job at a large warehouse, where she worked as a cashier. Subsequently she worked as a secretary, but she could not handle the stress at work and ended up at home with a burnout. In addition, she developed a personality disorder and suffered from severe panic attacks. Because of her mental health problems, she is now unable to work and receives disability benefits. Until a year ago, she was in an abusive relationship. One night, she stabbed her boyfriend – in self-defense, according to Ellen. Her children witnessed the incident, and as a result they were taken away by the Child Protection Board. Ellen says she has an alcohol problem; she drinks up to three bottles of wine a day. Over the years, she has been convicted for several violent offenses.*

*Ray left the institution without a high-school degree, and although he held a formal job once, he worked in the informal labor market for most of his adult life. He did go to the job agency several times, but he could not find a regular job because of his lack of work experience. At the moment, he works (informally) as a mechanic in a company owned by his father's friend. His parents give him money, and he earns some extra cash by selling marihuana and by swindling people by pretending to sell mobile phones on the Internet. He has never had his own place to live in; he stays with his parents or with friends. He is addicted to smoking marihuana.*

*James joined the army not long after leaving the institution. He then pursued a technical course in the army but had to leave after an incident for which he had to appear before the military court. After leaving the army, he wanted to stay on the right track, so he took on every job that he could get. He also had his own company for a while, but this company went bankrupt. He now works as a welder for a large cable company, and he is very satisfied with his job. He lives with his girlfriend in a quiet town. His girlfriend is pregnant, and he is optimistic about the future.*

*Soon after Regina left the institution, she met a man who owned a brothel. Because she had nowhere else to go, she moved in with him. She had trouble finding a job because she did not finish high school; she thus started working in the brothel. She attempted to leave the business several times but failed because she had no money and no place to go. After working as a prostitute for four years, she finally broke up with her boyfriend and*

1 The stories described in this chapter are derived from face-to-face interviews that the author conducted with respondents from the 17Up study. All identifying information has been changed for reasons of confidentiality.

*left. She found a job in a supermarket and enrolled herself in a course. Subsequently, she worked as a nail stylist and hairdresser for some years and recently opened her own beauty salon. Even though she has to work over 60 hours a week, she is really proud of what she has achieved.*

## 6.1 INTRODUCTION

This dissertation examined the role of employment and crime in the adult lives of previously institutionalized youths, such as Ellen, Ray, James, and Regina. In the Netherlands, over 4,000 youths are institutionalized in juvenile justice or youth care institutions every year. Currently, however, it is largely unclear as to how these youths' lives develop after leaving an institution. Previously institutionalized youths are characterized by a vulnerable background which places them at risk of both continued involvement in criminal behavior and experiencing difficulties adapting to 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 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 at examining how previously institutionalized youths fared 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, (2) the effects of conviction and incarceration on employment chances, and (3) the extent to which employment and crime influence adult life adjustment. These three main aims are addressed in the four empirical chapters of this dissertation.

In order to examine the complex relationship between the employment career and criminal career of vulnerable youths and to study to what extent they become established as adults, 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. Register data have the advantage that they are very accurate for the entire observation period, as opposed to when respondents have to report retrospectively about the occurrence and timing of events. For example, the data provide precise information about when an individual committed a crime for which he or she was convicted and day-to-day accounts of whether someone was officially employed. 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. This self-report data on a variety of adult life outcomes provide insight into adult outcomes in life domains that are not well documented in official databases, such as health, alcohol use, and substance use. Furthermore, rich information on background characteristics retrieved from treatment files that were constructed during the juveniles' stay in the institution was available.

This study thus used a unique and detailed dataset. By combining different types of detailed information (namely, officially registered data, self-report data, and dossier information) and by using advanced analysis techniques (namely, random effects and fixed effects models), this study was able to examine the longitudinal association between employment and crime while taking possible selection effects in the work-crime relationship into account. Moreover, compared to most previous longitudinal research, this study covers a relatively long observation period of 15 years. Following high-risk youth well into adulthood is crucial when studying transitions into adult roles such as employment and its relation to criminal career development.

By studying this sample of previously institutionalized youths, this dissertation aimed to contribute to the existing body of research by testing a number of theories addressing the work-crime relationship using longitudinal data for both men and women in the Dutch context. However, the specific nature of this sample entails that caution is warranted while generalizing the results from this dissertation to other groups.

This chapter is organized as follows. First, following the three main aims of this dissertation, the results of the empirical chapters are summarized and the theoretical implications of the findings are discussed. Then, the implications of the findings of this study for policy and practice are discussed. The chapter closes with directions for future research.

## 6.2 MAIN FINDINGS AND THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

### 6.2.1 *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. Although the majority of the sample was institutionalized based on a civil-law measure, 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) onvicted 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, with 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 high-risk 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 outcomes than women.

### 6.2.2 *The importance of employment in altering the criminal career*

The first aim of this dissertation was to examine the effect of employment on offending. Can work contribute to desistance from crime for vulnerable youths, such as James whose story is described at the beginning of this chapter? Or is employment 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? The findings from chapters 2 and 3 suggest the former: employment can be of great importance in altering the criminal careers of high-risk youths.

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 high-risk 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 offend-

ing, 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 high-risk men and women, over and above the effects of stable individual characteristics that are thought to increase both the risk of crime and unemployment (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). 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, economic and strain theories state that receiving an income can directly reduce financial motivation for crime (e.g., Agnew, 1992; Becker, 1968; Merton, 1968). According to these theories, employment and income support would reduce offending, since they both generate a legitimate income. Findings from chapter 2 show that formerly institutionalized men and women accrued less convictions in the years that they are employed. Chapter 3 shows that in males income support is associated with a lower serious offending rate as well.

These findings are in line with expectations based on theories emphasizing the financial motivation for crime. Moreover, as was expected based on strain theories, employment and income support were found to have stronger effects on property than on violent offending. These findings suggest that crime is (at least partly) financially motivated.

However, findings differ importantly for men and women. Whereas employment is associated with reduced offending for both men and women, the negative effects of income support on offending were found only for males. Thus, for men, income support and employment appear to relieve financial strain and thereby lower offending. For women, however, the role of income in reducing the financial motivation for crime is less clear, as receiving income support is not associated with a reduction in criminal behavior. On the contrary, for women receiving benefits, and disability benefits in particular, is associated with an increase in offending. These results therefore do not lend support for theories that stress the financial motivation for crime, but indicate that relationship between receiving social security benefits and (reduced) offending is more complex for women than for men. Two explanations can be offered for this.

First, 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. Second, 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. In the current sample, women more often have children than men, and already at very young ages (Zoutewelle-Terovan et al., 2012).

Although the results of this study are to some extent in line with theories that emphasize the financial motivation for crime, it was expected that employment is more than just a source of income. Based on control theories (e.g., Sampson & Laub, 1993), it was hypothesized that other non-monetary aspects associated with being employed are important in reducing criminal behavior as well. Several findings of chapters 2 and 3 lend support for this.

Both chapters 2 and 3 showed that previously institutionalized men and women are less often convicted when they are employed. Whereas this 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 experience of structure in daily routines and direct social control when employed (Laub & Sampson, 2003; Shover, 1996). Although this could not be explicitly tested, findings from chapter 3 tentatively support this claim. Based on control theories, it was expected that employment should reduce offending more so than income support, since next to monetary gains employment provides social control whereas income support does not. The findings from chapter 3 confirmed this hypothesis, showing a larger effect of employment on offending than of income support on offending. This indicates that more than merely receiving an income, also the non-monetary aspects of work (such as social control) are important in desisting from crime. 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 control in refraining from criminal behavior.

Moreover, as the Dutch welfare state provides those unemployed with a minimum income, financial strain resulting from unemployment should be less than in countries characterized by a less supportive welfare regime. Therefore, finding stronger effects for employment compared to receiving benefits within the context of the Dutch welfare system again highlights the importance of the non-monetary aspects of work – such as social control – in facilitating desistance from crime (see also Savolainen, 2009).

In addition, following Sampson and Laub's theory of informal social control (1993), it was expected that, over and above the negative effect of employment on offending, stable employment would further decrease the conviction frequency of high-risk young adults. This study indeed showed that in addition to the instantaneous effect of employment on offending, continuous employment further decreases offending. This indicates that, as assumed by Sampson and Laub (1993; Laub & Sampson, 2003), especially a good, stable job has the ability to contribute to desistance, because it offers the possibility to tighten the bond to conventional society. Those working in stable, satisfying employment have the opportunity to invest in social capital, and for them, work increasingly becomes a source of informal social control. 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.

Whereas a negative effect of continued employment was found to be associated with a decrease in criminal behavior, a longer duration of unemployment was expected to be related to an increase in offending, based on research showing detrimental psychosocial consequences of (long-term) unemployment (e.g., Paul & Moser, 2009). However, chapter 2 demonstrated that while a longer unemployment spell is criminogenic for women, for men it 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 employment participation is low in the

sample under study, work is still associated with a reduction in criminal behavior. Building upon the Dutch study by Van der Geest, Bijleveld, and Blokland (2011), this study demonstrated that, besides selection effects, both employment and income support were found to be associated with lower levels of offending, thereby supporting theories that stress the financial motivation for crime. Moreover, the findings of this thesis point to the importance of social control in refraining from criminal behavior. Therefore, this study adds to this existing body of literature examining the work-crime relationship (e.g., Farrington et al., 1986; Sampson & Laub, 1990; Van der Geest, Bijleveld & Blokland, 2011), by showing that work yields the ability to alter the criminal careers of at-risk young adults in the Netherlands.

Moreover, whereas prior research, including the Dutch research by Van der Geest and colleagues (2011), almost exclusively focused on males, this study demonstrated that there are, to some extent, gender differences in the effects of employment on crime. Although certain non-monetary aspects of work, such as direct social control and structure resulting from being employed, appear to be important for both men and women, for women, the role of informal social control in reducing criminal behavior is less supported by the results. Steady employment, which offers the possibility to invest in social capital and gaining a stake in conformity, was found to affect criminal behavior only for men. Moreover, gender differences in the relationship between income support and offending were observed.

Going back to the story of James, employment appears to have played an important role in his life. James knew he needed to work hard to stay on the right track, and his jobs helped him with that. After years of working low-quality jobs, he is very satisfied with his current job at a cable company. According to James, his work is important to him as it gives him self-confidence.

### 6.2.3 *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 engage 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 what extent were the employment prospects of Ray, described in the beginning of this chapter, shaped by his history of unemployment history and crime? 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 previously institutionalized 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.

Moreover, when only looking at the years in which subjects are unemployed, the models show that for both men and women, a criminal history does not decrease the likelihood of finding a job in the subsequent year. Only unemployment history exerts a considerable negative influence on an individual's future employment chances.

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, based on signaling theory it was hypothesized that unemployment history damages future employment chances due to the negative signal it constitutes (Spence, 1973). This study suggests that signaling effects are at play in decreasing one's employment chances. 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 one's 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 (Becker, 1964), 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, in the labor market, previously institutionalized youths are hindered by assumptions of inferior worker characteristics on part of potential employers, as well as their actual lack of work experience and skills.

Besides the detrimental effects of prior unemployment on future employment outcomes, a history of conviction or incarceration was thought to decrease

employment chances as well, as was expected based on labeling theory (Becker, 1963; Lemert, 1967). According to labeling theory, 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. This study showed that labeling effects may indeed be at play, however, only with regard to convictions, and only for women. For men, when taking into account their unemployment history, a history of conviction and incarceration does not affect their employment prospects. Thus, no support for labeling theory is found for men; rather, the findings point to the detrimental effects of experiencing unemployment early in the employment career. For women, however, convictions have an adverse effect on the likelihood of employment in the subsequent year, over and above the detrimental effects of experiencing unemployment.

It was also expected that incarceration would negatively affect employment probability, both because of labeling effects and the loss of human capital. However, for both men and women, no additional negative effect of incarceration on the likelihood of employment was found. Incarceration does thus not seem to yield larger labeling effects than mere convictions, and no support for the process of human capital deterioration during incarceration was found.

As convictions were found to lower employment probability only for women, while controlling for the effects of unemployment history, the findings suggest 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 (Holzer et al., 2003).

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 (see Raphael, 2014), 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.

Findings from this dissertation, showing that there is no additional negative effect of incarceration on employment chances, are in contrast with several US-based studies reporting significant detrimental effects of incarceration on employment outcomes (e.g., Apel & Sweeten, 2010; Pettit & Lyons, 2009; Raphael, 2014). This could be related to the relatively mild penal climate in

the Netherlands, because of which prison spells 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. Moreover, the effects of a spell of incarceration on employment chances might be differential, as for some, job opportunities may have deteriorated, whereas for others, job training and reintegration may have improved their job opportunities (Kling, 2006). Although in contrast with most US studies, the findings from this study are in line with another Dutch study by Ramakers et al. (2012), comparing ex-prisoners with a similar but non-imprisoned group of unemployed males who are to experience an incarceration spell in the future. This study demonstrated that ex-prisoners are more likely to find employment, and do so more quickly, than non-imprisoned unemployed males. In sum, the employment prospects of vulnerable 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 story of Ray seems to support these findings. Ray has hardly any formal work experience, because of which he was repeatedly turned down by employment agencies. He earns his money through illegal activities, and he seems to have given up on finding a formal job, because, according to Ray, 'Who is going to hire a person with a 9-year gap in his resume?'

#### 6.2.4 *Adult outcomes of previously institutionalized youths*

To what extent are the vulnerable youths who are central to this dissertation able to adjust to adult life when they are in their thirties? As outlined above, the findings from chapters 2, 3, and 4 point – with regards to crime – to the importance of employment and the detrimental effects of unemployment in the lives of previously institutionalized youths. Yet, these chapters also showed that among these youths, employment participation is low and involvement in crime is high. What does this mean for the life courses of previously institutionalized youths such as Ellen and Regina? To what extent do their (un)employment history and criminal history affect the outcomes in other life domains? To answer this question, the third and final aim of this thesis was to examine adult outcomes of previously institutionalized youths and the extent to which employment and crime influence their level of adult life adjustment.

As described earlier, chapter 5 of this dissertation demonstrated that, when previously institutionalized youths are in their thirties, a large part of them is experiencing difficulties in adult life domains. Are vulnerable youths then predetermined to end up doing poorly? The answer to this question is negative. The vulnerable background that is characteristic of previously institutionalized youths does not necessarily predispose them to negative outcomes in the future. Findings from chapter 5 indicate that most of the personal and background characteristics, except for academic failure, are not significantly related to the level of adult life adjustment, a measure comprising several adult life domains

including accommodation, family formation, health, alcohol use, and substance use. 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.

While static views as those of Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) predict that certain negative individual characteristics cause difficulties in multiple life domains throughout the life course, this is found not to be the case for the vulnerable youths under study here. For them, childhood risk factors do not predict failure to adapt to conventional life domains. Only academic failure is significantly related to poorer adult outcomes, which points to the importance of education in helping at-risk youths improve their prospects in adulthood.

As was expected based on life-course theories, such as the theory of Sampson and Laub (1993; Laub & Sampson, 2003), change is possible in the lives of high-risk youths. 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 (Sampson & Laub, 1993; 1997). 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 poor adult outcomes for previously institutionalized youths. These findings are in line with the few prior studies on the long-term outcomes of at-risk or delinquent youths (e.g., Farrington et al., 2006; Nilsson & Estrada, 2009). Moreover, this study points to the importance of employment in promoting well-being and success in other life domains. This is illustrated by the story of Regina who, after years of working in prostitution, managed to start an education and find (regular) work and now runs her own business. However, others are at risk of becoming trapped in a downward spiral. To illustrate, although Ellen started a job after leaving the institution, she soon became unable to work due to psychiatric problems. Over the years, she was convicted for several violent offenses. She became alcohol dependent and ended up in an abusive relationship, as a result of which her children were taken away from her.

#### 6.2.5 *Conclusion*

This dissertation examined the role of employment and crime in the adult lives of previously institutionalized youths. These youths are characterized by a troubled background and generally attained a low level of education. The study showed that a large part of these youths experiences difficulties in adulthood.

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.

The first aim of this dissertation was to examine the effect of employment on crime. The longitudinal character of the study allowed for examining whether a causal or spurious relationship between employment and crime exists in this sample of previously institutionalized youths. The study demonstrated that, even though not all high-risk youths are able to make a successful transition to the labor market, employment is shown to contribute to the process of desistance from crime. Although selection effects are at play, the findings from this dissertation also lend support for causal effects of work on crime. Thus, contrary to what the theory of Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) predicts, employment can be of great importance for youths characterized by a high-risk background in helping them adopt a conventional, non-criminal lifestyle. Although receiving an income can contribute to a reduction in criminal behavior by relieving financial strain, this dissertation especially found support for theories that stress that social control that inheres in employment can prevent people from engaging in crime (Sampson & Laub, 1993; Laub & Sampson, 2003). Labor market participation thus yields the ability to alter the criminal careers of previously institutionalized youths.

The second aim of this thesis was to examine the effects of conviction and incarceration on employment prospects. This study demonstrated that the employment prospects of previously institutionalized youths are severely compromised. Especially the negative signal of prior unemployment and the lack of human capital was found to damage their employment chances. Labeling effects due to a criminal record (Becker, 1963; Lemert, 1967) were only found for females, while a history of incarceration did not decrease the employment probability for men or for women.

Finally, the third aim of this dissertation was to examine to what extent employment history and criminal history influence the level of adult life adjustment for previously institutionalized youths. While most childhood risk factors did not predict adverse adult outcomes, the findings do point to the importance of education in promoting positive outcomes in adulthood. Furthermore, employment contributes to positive outcomes in adulthood, not only in terms of an adult life without crime but also by promoting life success in general. Those who form ties to employment show a higher level of adult life adjustment. For vulnerable youths, employment thus seems a crucial stepping-stone in adopting a conventional lifestyle. Moreover, while employment can function as a turning point in the lives of previously institutionalized youths, adult offending is related

to poorer outcomes in adulthood. Those who engage in criminal behavior in adulthood seem therefore at risk of becoming trapped in a downward spiral, making it increasingly more difficult to connect to conventional life domains (Sampson & Laub, 1993; 1997).

All in all, previously institutionalized youths experience serious difficulties in the labor market. Yet, for those 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 of great importance for these vulnerable youths. Failure in the labor market puts them at risk of falling through the cracks and can severely compromise their outcomes in adulthood.

In conclusion, for previously institutionalized youths, the road to adulthood is a difficult one, and as the stories of James, Regina, Ellen, and Ray illustrate, outcomes in adulthood can differ greatly. Whereas James and Regina ended up doing relatively well, life is much more difficult for Ellen and Ray. Unfortunately, Ellen and Ray are not the only ones with poor outcomes in adulthood, and their stories are also not the most extreme. Still, previously institutionalized youths are not destined to end up doing poorly in adulthood; rather, employment can bring about positive change in the lives of both at-risk men and women.

### 6.3 IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

This study showed that even for high-risk youth, despite their troubled backgrounds, employment is of great importance in helping them adopt a conventional, non-criminal lifestyle in adulthood. Therefore, the findings of this dissertation yield important implications for both policy and practice. Interventions aimed at facilitating a successful transition to the labor market are crucial for three reasons. First, employment is associated with desistance from crime. Second, experiencing unemployment is detrimental for later employment chances. And third, employment contributes to a conventional lifestyle in general and promotes vulnerable youths becoming healthy, self-sufficient members of society.

While a successful transition to the labor market is thus of great importance, employment participation among previously institutionalized youths is generally low. As unemployment has detrimental effects on their future employment prospects, high-risk youths will benefit from interventions aimed at increasing employment participation. Moreover, this study strongly suggests that vulnerable youths need continued support to help them *stay* employed, as their employment careers are highly unstable and characterized by multiple unemployment spells.

Although employment is one of the life domains in which interventions can relatively easily be implemented, prior research from the US shows mixed results about the extent to which employment programs achieve their goals. To illustrate, a review by Heinrich and Holzer (2011) shows that some employment

programs for at-risk youths in the US such as vocational education and training programs for disadvantaged youths appear to have the desired effect, at least in the short run, in terms of a higher rate of certificate receipt, increased earnings, and reduced criminal behavior (Bloom et al., 2009; Schochet et al., 2008). However, evaluations of work programs for (adult) ex-offenders in general show limited effects on criminal behavior (Bushway & Reuter, 2002; Visser et al., 2005) or suggest that only certain types of ex-offenders benefit from employment programs, such as those who are older (Uggen, 2000) or those who are at high-risk of re-offending (Zweig, Yahner & Redcross, 2011). Although helping at-risk groups or ex-offenders to become successful in the labor market appears to be complex, findings from this thesis do indicate that support in the domain of employment is crucial for future life success.

Interventions for institutionalized youths should already start during their stay in an institution, as the setting of institutionalization offers the possibility for structured support and training in the employment domain. In addition, aftercare is especially important. The support that vulnerable youths receive from government systems in which they are involved, such as the Dutch Child Protection Board, ends as they reach adulthood. Yet, these youths might not yet have the resources and skills to fend for themselves (Osgood et al., 2005). Therefore, also after institutionalization, efforts should be focused on improving the labor market position for vulnerable youths and facilitate labor market entry. Efforts should be directed not only at helping previously institutionalized youths find a job but also at helping them to stay employed. Furthermore, financial support also appears to have the ability to help people lower their criminal behavior, especially for males. However, supported income should always be combined with job search assistance, given the negative effects of experiencing unemployment on future employment chances. Moreover, special attention should be paid to high-risk women, who in general appear to suffer from a more complex set of psychosocial problems than men and might therefore need more support than just in the domain of employment or financial assistance.

When the youths studied in this dissertation left the institution in the 1990s, aftercare fell short. Since then, efforts were taken to professionalize the support offered to institutionalized youths in order to improve their reintegration process. The Dutch employment program Work-Wise is an intervention for institutionalized youths that aims at improving their employment outcomes by focusing on education and vocational training, during and after institutionalization, with individual help from a case manager. Work-Wise started in 2000 and is since 2007 implemented in all Dutch juvenile (justice) institutions. Although long-term evaluations are not yet available, the program shows promising results in the short run. To illustrate, 75 percent of the juveniles are employed or in school six months after leaving an institution (Work-Wise, 2007). In addition, *Kamers met Kansen* ('Rooms with a Future') is a housing project aimed at increasing social participation among at-risk young adults, by offering them support in the domains of education, work, finances, and independent living. Short-term evaluations show promising results as well (Horjus, De Groot & Horjus, 2006). Evidence-based interventions such as Work-Wise and *Kamers*

*met Kansen* that assist vulnerable youths as they transition to adulthood via participation in the labor market are essential to promote well-being and positive adult outcomes of youths who leave an institution nowadays.

#### 6.4 IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study provided insight into the complex relationship between employment and crime. However, future research in this area is needed to further enhance our understanding of the work-crime relationship. To begin with, this dissertation showed that for previously institutionalized youths, employment is associated with a decrease in criminal behavior. Moreover, this study indicated that besides the income that a job generates, especially the social control associated with being employed might explain why employment negatively affects offending. However, as the nature of the data used for this dissertation did not allow for testing all possible mechanisms that might be at play, future research should further examine causal mechanisms responsible for the observed relationship between work and crime.

For example, it might not be employment per se, but especially certain aspects of work, including quality of work and job satisfaction, that determine whether employment affects criminal behavior (Allan & Steffensmeier, 1989; Sampson & Laub, 1993; Uggen, 1999; Wadsworth, 2006). As a result of the data source used in this thesis, namely, the Suwinet register that only provides information on whether an individual is (officially) employed or not, while it lacks information about subjective measures of the experience of work, such as perceived job quality or job satisfaction, the effects of subjective experiences of a particular job on offending could not be examined. Since these are aspects that are important in determining the quality of the bond to employment, which is crucial for desistance according to Sampson and Laub (1993, Laub & Sampson, 2003), future research using measures that capture the subjective experience of work using self-report or qualitative information could shed further light on the mechanisms at play in the relationship between employment and reduced offending.

Furthermore, educational attainment is likely to contribute to improved employment opportunities and thereby to higher job quality and job satisfaction. The measure of educational attainment used in chapters 2 and 3 of this dissertation was collected from the treatment files that were constructed when juveniles were institutionalized in the judicial treatment facility. This means that only information on the level of education before admission in the institution, when juveniles were on average 15 years old, was available. It may very well be that some of the subjects continued to attain some form of education into young adulthood, and the self-report data in chapter 5 indeed shows that this is the case for around 70 percent of the interviewed previously institutionalized youths. Since education might (partly) mediate the relationship between employment and reduced offending (e.g., Bernburg & Krohn, 2003; Tanner, Davies & O'Grady, 1999), it is unfortunate that in this study a more accurate

measure of the level of educational attainment for all subjects from the original sample could not be included. Future research using time-varying variables for educational attainment could shed light on the extent to which educational attainment promotes opportunities for higher-qualified jobs for previously institutionalized youths, which in turn decreases the chances of criminal behavior.

In addition, in this dissertation, analyses were conducted using data divided in yearly intervals. However, this may not be sufficiently fine-grained to capture the temporal ordering of events in the employment and criminal career. Analyzing the work-crime relationship using smaller time intervals can help to enhance our understanding of the causal mechanisms that are at play. To illustrate, a recent study by Skardhamar and Savolainen (2012) examining the effect of employment on officially registered offending using monthly level analyses shows that criminal behavior already declined during the months prior to the moment of job entry, rather than that offending decreased from the moment the job started. This indicates that processes of cognitive transformation might be at play (Giordano, Cernkovich & Rudolph, 2002), meaning that an individual first wants and attempts to desist from crime and then uses conventional adult roles such as employment as a 'hook for change' that can facilitate and reinforce the desistance process.

Moreover, building upon the work of Giordano et al. (2002), as well as on insights from – among other things – social and cognitive psychology and behavioral economics, Paternoster and Bushway (2009) propose an identity theory of desistance from crime and argue that a change in one's identity is necessary for desistance. According to this theory, people have a current identity or 'working self', for example, the image of oneself as a criminal, as well as a future 'possible self'. This possible self can be an image of what a person wants to be or an image of how they do not want to end up. Paternoster and Bushway argue that especially the latter, which they refer to as the 'feared self', acts as an important motivator for desistance. The growing awareness of the accumulating costs of crime and the realization that they might end up as their feared self can make offenders decide to change. This process of identity change is then reinforced by more positive motivations about the person they want to become, for example, a good worker. According to Paternoster and Bushway, offenders will not form bonds to social institutions, such as employment, until they have contemplated the possible self as a non-offender (2009:1105). Therefore, following this theory, any negative effect of employment on crime is not due to the opportunities for change that a job offers but is actually caused by offenders' change in identity following the motivation and decision to desist from crime prior to job entry. Future research could greatly enhance our understanding of the employment-crime relationship by examining these alternative explanations for the observed relationship between employment and reduced offending.

Furthermore, this thesis demonstrated that the employment prospects of previously institutionalized youths are severely compromised. For the high-risk youths studied in this dissertation, particularly for males, a criminal history was not found to affect the probability of finding work per se, once prior

unemployment was taken into account. However, it is possible that high-risk young adults do experience stigmatization due to labeling effects, but that this translates into them being compelled in unstable, low-quality jobs, rather than unemployment. Thus, a criminal record or history of incarceration may still affect the chances of finding good-quality, well-paying work (Davies & Tanner, 2003). Given the lack of information about the quality of work in the dataset used in this dissertation, it is as of yet unclear whether high-risk individuals with a criminal record are able to secure high-qualified, satisfying employment, or that they are forced to settle for low-quality and low-paying work. Moreover, future research focusing in more detail on the types of crimes for which one is convicted, as well as studies comparing the employment prospects of at-risk youths with and without a criminal history, might shed light on how employment prospects are affected by labeling effects due to a criminal record or incarceration.

In addition, it might be that, instead of experiencing difficulties with finding a (higher-qualified) job, high-risk men and women are not even looking for formal work. Relying on official register data, they seem to be 'out of the labor force', while in reality, they might choose to work in the informal economy (Fagan & Freeman, 1999; Freeman, 1991). Self-report information is necessary to gain insight into the extent to which vulnerable youths end up working in the black labor market and how that affects offending (see Verbruggen, Van der Geest, and Blokland, (2014)). Furthermore, they might not be interested in finding a regular job, because it can be more lucrative to make money from crime. Investing in 'criminal capital' increases illegal earnings (Loughran, Nguyen, Piquero & Fagan, 2013), and might thereby further increase the distance to the formal labor market.

Moreover, future research using additional self-report information can shed light on the extent to which high-risk youths use the opportunities that adult roles, such as the workplace, offer, to engage in deviant behavior (Felson, 2006; Mars, 1982; Moffitt, 1993; 1994). For example, certain jobs, such as owning a bar or jobs in transport, might be used to facilitate or conceal illegal activities such as drug trafficking (Van Koppen, 2013).

Future research is also necessary to show whether employment prospects of vulnerable youths are affected differently in times of high unemployment rates. The current study examined employment between 1990 and 2010. During most of these years, the Dutch economy performed relatively well, and unemployment levels were low. However, due to the most recent global economic crisis, unemployment levels have risen tremendously, especially among the young. This tightness in the labor market is likely to disproportionately affect vulnerable groups such as previously institutionalized youths (Jongman, Weerman & Kroes, 1993; Nilsson, Bäckman & Estrada, 2013). After all, it will be difficult for vulnerable youths to compete with job applicants with better resumes and no criminal record. Future research will have to show to what extent the employment prospects of at-risk youths are further deteriorated in times of high unemployment rates.

Furthermore, this dissertation points to the detrimental effects of offending on adult outcomes and the importance of employment in promoting life success in general. Although employment is one of the key adult life domains, it is important to study the development of criminal behavior in relation to employment as well as other life domains, such as marriage and parenthood, addiction, and physical and mental health problems. As chapter 5 of this dissertation demonstrated, a substantial part of the high-risk men and women are unsuccessful in multiple adult life domains, and it is likely that failure in one life domain is associated with failure in other life domains. Transitions to adult roles tend to go hand in hand, for example, employed people are more attractive partners, and a job becomes more important for someone who has a family to provide for (Sampson & Laub, 1993; Savolainen, 2009). In addition, alcohol or substance abuse problems, as well as physical and mental health problems, make it difficult, if not impossible, to successfully participate in the labor market. Moreover, especially drug abuse is related to criminal behavior (e.g., Bennet & Holloway, 2009; Goldstein, 1985; Gossop et al., 2000). In this dissertation, marriage and parenthood were only included as control variables, and time-varying data on addiction and health problems were regrettably unavailable. Future research can help untangle the relationship between the criminal career and developments in other life domains.

Finally, this thesis has demonstrated that women deserve more attention from researchers examining the work-crime relationship, as this study indicated that there are gender differences in the relationship between employment and crime. Future research should therefore focus on why there are differences between men and women with regard to the effects of employment and unemployment on criminal behavior, as well as in the effects of criminal history on employment outcomes. Especially the relationship between income support and offending, and the background and life circumstances of benefits recipients, needs further study, also in countries with different welfare regimes, to better understand when and for whom a supported income can help reducing criminal behavior.

To close, in a few years most men and women in the 17Up study will have celebrated their 40th birthday. Additional data collection, for example, on respondents' subjective experiences of work, involvement in informal or illegal ways to earn money, and work-related criminal behavior, as well as retrospectively collected longitudinal information on other adult life domains, could help address at least some of the avenues for future research mentioned above. In addition, future data collection on an already sampled matched comparison group can help shed light on the generalizability of the findings from this thesis.