



Self-efficacy, aspirations, and residential placement outcomes: Why belief in a prosocial self matters



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ABSTRACT

Purpose: While prior research has documented the relationship between self-efficacy and delinquency, there is a gap in the literature on how self-efficacy is related to the continuation of antisocial behavior for youth involved in the justice system. This study examines whether juvenile offenders' beliefs in their abilities to live a prosocial life predict conventional aspirations for the future. It also assesses the joint effects of self-efficacy and prosocial aspirations on length of stay in residential placement and recidivism among a sample of delinquent youth.

Methods: We examine relationships between self-efficacy, aspirations, and residential placement outcomes using a sample of 12,955 juvenile offenders who completed a juvenile justice residential placement program in Florida. A generalized structural equation model that controls for demographics and various risk factors was used to model the multiple outcomes of varying levels of measurement.

Results: Youth with higher prosocial self-efficacy report higher prosocial aspirations for their future. Self-efficacy and aspirations are also negatively related to lengths of stay in residential placement and subsequent delinquent behavior.

Conclusions: Juvenile justice interventions should target youths' attitudes and beliefs related to prosocial identity. Cognitive behavioral interventions, positive reinforcement of prosocial behavior, and skill training may help prevent youth recidivism.

1. Introduction

Prior research has shown that juvenile recidivism is predicted by various indicators of criminal history, such as age of first contact with the law, number of prior offenses, and number of prior commitments (Cottle, Lee, & Heilbrun, 2001; Grunwald, Lockwood, Harris, & Mennis, 2010; Mulder, Brand, Bullens, & Van Marle, 2011; Trulson, Marquart, Mullings, & Caeti, 2005). Given that formal interventions by the justice system influence how youth perceive themselves (Al-Talib & Griffin, 1994; Evans, Levy, Sullenberger, & Vyas, 1991; Jensen, 1972; Restivo & Lanier, 2015), it is possible that youth involved in the justice system have less confidence in their abilities to affect positive behavioral change. Albert Bandura (1977) theorized that prior performance executing behavior is what is most influential in shaping one's self-efficacy, and that self-efficacy predicts whether a behavior will be attempted to reach a desired goal. Consequently, without belief in their abilities to control their antisocial behavior, youth will likely fail to achieve behavioral change through setting conventional goals for themselves to strive for during reentry, and cycle back into the justice

system.

As juvenile justice interventions have been shown to effectively target psychological risk factors and reduce criminal behavior (McGlynn, Hahn, & Hagan, 2012; Pearson, Lipton, Cleland, & Yee, 2002; Wilson, Bouffard, & MacKenzie, 2005), time spent in juvenile corrections could be used to restructure cognitions that are associated with their antisocial behavior. Furthermore, they can prepare youth with life skills that will be necessary to achieve prosocial goals during their transition into the community. This change in cognitive processes and strengthening of prosocial skills could aid in preventing reoffending and further involvement with the justice system. While juvenile justice agencies may not always be able to affect the situations and environments that youth return to upon reentry, they can provide youth with tools necessary to set and reach conventional goals, so that past antisocial behavior is not viewed as being a determinant of their future.

Drawing from Albert Bandura's work on self-efficacy, this study examines how the beliefs juvenile offenders have in their abilities to control their antisocial behavior relate to the prosocial goals they set for the future, and how these two factors predict justice-related outcomes

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among a sample of youth reentering the community from residential placement. We begin with a review of the literature pertaining to self-efficacy, followed by work that has examined how self-efficacy is related to aspirations for the future. This provides context for our examination of how these factors are related to two juvenile justice outcomes associated with being released from residential placement: length of stay and recidivism. We then provide a description of the data and methods used to assess our three hypotheses and present the results of our generalized structural equation model. Finally, conclusions about these findings and their implications for research and juvenile justice policy are presented.

2. Literature review

2.1. Self-efficacy

The importance of self-efficacy was advanced by Bandura, who argued that knowing how to behave and possessing the skills necessary to do so were not the only factors that determined whether or not a behavior would be executed (Bandura, 1982). Rather, the perception of one's own abilities plays an important role in determining whether a certain behavior will be attempted to deal with situations and accomplish goals, as well as the amount of effort that will be used in doing so (Bandura, 1977; Bandura, 1982). Unless individuals believe that they are capable of acting in ways that will produce desired outcomes, there is little motivation to attempt such behavior. This lack of belief in one's own abilities will also result in a defeatist attitude, with individuals being more likely to give up when they encounter obstacles or experience failed attempts at changing their own behavior (Bandura, 1995; Bandura, 2006). As a result, Bandura suggests self-efficacy is a central element in the study of behavioral change.

Much of the literature on self-efficacy has examined its relation to positive outcomes, such as academic and work-related achievement (Multon, Brown, & Lent, 1991; Stajkovic & Luthans, 1998), health-related behavior (Sheeran et al., 2016), and positive parenting (Galtz & Buchanan, 2015). Self-efficacy has also become the focus of studies on criminal behavior, with findings showing that self-efficacy is negatively related to anti-social behavior (Ahlin, 2010; Bandura, Caprara, Barbaranelli, Gerbino, & Pastorelli, 2003; Ludwig & Pittman, 1999). Ludwig and Pittman (1999) found that self-efficacy is negatively related to delinquency, engaging in risky sexual behaviors, and drug use. Bandura et al. (2003) showed that adolescents' perceptions of their abilities to control negative affect are directly related to decreased delinquency. Negative affect self-efficacy is also indirectly related to delinquency through increased self-efficacy regarding academic abilities and abilities to resist peer pressure. Agnew and White (1992) also found that adolescents were more likely to respond to strain with delinquency when self-efficacy was low. Authors argued that this was because individuals with high self-efficacy believe that they can cope with life's strains without needing to resort to delinquent methods. These studies have highlighted the importance of further examining how self-efficacy relates to youth offending. The present study uses a measure of prosocial self-efficacy, youth's beliefs in their abilities to control their antisocial behavior, and examines how this is related to length of stay in residential placement and recidivism.

2.2. Prior behavior and prosocial self-efficacy

There are multiple ways in which self-efficacy is argued to be developed, but the most salient is prior performance accomplishments (Bandura, 1977). This relates to personal experiences with successes and failures, which are the best indications of whether one has what it takes to act in a way that will accomplish a desired outcome (Bandura, 1997). Within the context of prosocial behavior, it is likely that a past marked with poor choices and prior encounters with the justice system have an effect on individuals' perceived abilities to stop their own

antisocial behavior. However, individuals who have experienced past failures in this domain do not necessarily have low levels of self-efficacy. Rather, an indicator of high self-efficacy is sustained efforts despite prior failures, because the belief in the possibility of success prevents them from abandoning their efforts (Bandura, 1997). This highlights that those with high self-efficacy develop resilience and "produce their future, rather than simply foretell it" (Bandura, 1986, p. 395).

Qualitative research explored this topic through interviews with ex-offenders and those still involved with criminal behavior. In Maruna's (2001) interviews of persisters and desisters from crime, those who were still persisting with criminal behavior exhibited low self-efficacy, lacking in "language of agency" and describing the possibility of reforming their lives as being out of their control. However, those who desisted had high self-efficacy, viewing themselves as law-abiding individuals who had simply made poor choices and mistakes throughout their life that caused them to become involved with criminal behavior. They believed they were capable of living a conventional life despite their prior failures with executing law-abiding behavior. Likewise, a study by Bahr, Harris, Fisher, and Armstrong (2010) found that successful parolees differed from unsuccessful ones in the beliefs they had in their abilities to stay away from drugs and negative peers, as well as successfully fulfill the requirements of their parole, despite their prior interactions with the justice system. These qualitative studies shed light on the fact that a criminal past may affect offenders' perceptions of their abilities to change their behavior. While prior work on self-efficacy and delinquency has used general samples to examine how the two are related (Agnew & White, 1992; Ahlin, 2010; Bandura et al., 2003; Ludwig & Pittman, 1999), this study aims to add to the existing literature by examining how prosocial self-efficacy is related to the continuation of antisocial behavior among a sample of juvenile offenders in residential placement.

2.3. Prosocial self-efficacy and prosocial aspirations

Bandura (1991) argues that individuals with high levels of self-efficacy are more likely to set harder to reach goals and commit to them. This has garnered support from studies on education, which have shown that youths' academic self-efficacy is positively related to academic goals that they set for themselves (Carroll et al., 2009; Zimmerman, Bandura, & Martinez-Pons, 1992). These analogous findings may help explain why some offenders desist and others do not. If individuals feel they are unable to affect change in their behavior, they will avoid setting challenging goals for themselves that require behavioral change to attain, thus falling back into the same cycle of delinquent behavior. This argument is supported by a study which found that institutionalized youth had significantly lower ratings of self-regulatory efficacy than a sample of high school students. These youth were also less likely to set goals, especially challenging ones, and commit to achieving them (Carroll, Gordon, Haynes, & Houghton, 2013).

Most relevant to the current study, Brezina and Topalli (2012) examined criminal self-efficacy, or the belief offenders have in their ability to be successful in criminal pursuits, and its relationship to nonconventional goals. Findings of their study on male prisoners showed that the odds of desisting after release were significantly lower for prisoners who had high criminal self-efficacy. Qualitative interviews of non-incarcerated offenders revealed that offenders who were confident that they could achieve and maintain success in their non-conventional pursuits did not intend on desisting from their criminal behavior. Rather, they felt that if they kept up with the crimes in which they had experienced prior success and continued to improve their techniques, then they would continue to be successful. While these interviews show that criminal self-efficacy is related to deviant aspirations, it is equally as likely that prosocial self-efficacy relates to conventional aspirations. However, to our knowledge, no study has

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