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Publisher Citation

Myers, D. L. (2016), Juvenile Transfer to Adult Court. *Criminology & Public Policy*, 15: 927–938. doi:10.1111/1745-9133.12232

Comments

This is the peer reviewed version of the following article: Myers, D. L. (2016), Juvenile Transfer to Adult Court. *Criminology & Public Policy*, 15: 927–938, which has been published in final form at <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1745-9133.12232/abstract>. This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Wiley Terms and Conditions for Self-Archiving.

POLICY ESSAY

JUVENILE TRANSFER AND DETERRENCE

Juvenile Transfer to Adult Court:

Ongoing Search for Scientific Support

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During the 1990s, nationwide concerns over rising juvenile violent crime arrest rates and the perceived emergence of a large population of juvenile “super-predators” fueled numerous juvenile justice reforms (DiIulio, 1995, 1996; Howell, 1997; Snyder and Sickmund, 1999, 2006). Policy makers and practitioners moved rapidly to strengthen the sanctions and procedures available for handling serious and violent adolescent offenders by de-emphasizing traditional juvenile court philosophy and confidentiality, while seeking to increase information sharing, sentencing options, public safety, and offender accountability to victims and the community. Most notable were new and modified laws seeking to facilitate the process of transferring (also known as waiving, certifying, or remanding) adolescents to adult criminal court (Bishop, 2000; Fagan and Zimring, 2000;

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Jordan, 2006; Kupchik, 2006; Myers, 2001, 2005; Snyder, Sickmund, and Poe-Yamagata, 2000). By the turn of the century, virtually every state had adopted or modified laws intended to increase the transfer of juveniles to the adult criminal justice system (Adams and Addie, 2009; Griffin, 2003, 2008; Griffin, Torbet, and Szymanski, 1998; Snyder and Sickmund, 1999, 2006).

In contrast to the more recent evidence-based movement in juvenile justice (Howell, Lipsey, and Wilson, 2014; Lipsey, Howell, Kelly, Chapman, and Carver, 2010; Myers, 2013), the juvenile transfer movement of the 1990s was not backed by scientific research findings. Although public support existed for legislative efforts to increase the waiver of youthful offenders to adult criminal court (Feiler and Sheley, 1999; Greenwood, 1995; Meddis, 1993; Schwartz, Guo, and Kerbs, 1993; Sprott, 1998; Triplett, 1996), prior and subsequent research greatly questioned the efficacy of this practice (Farrington, Ohlin, and Wilson, 1986; Howell, 1996, 1997; Myers, 2001, 2005; Redding, 2003, 2008). Despite an overall lack of empirical support, modern waiver laws and statutory enhancements remain in place today, and it is estimated that between 130,000 and 250,000 offenders younger than 18 years of age may be handled each year in adult criminal courts nationwide (Bishop, 2000; Myers, 2005; Woolard, Odgers, Lanza-Kaduce, and Daglis, 2005; Sickmund and Puzzanchera, 2014).

In “Juvenile Transfer and the Specific Deterrence Hypothesis: Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis,” Steven Zane, Brandon Welsh, and Daniel Mears (2016, this issue) provide a thorough examination of the existing research on the effect of juvenile transfer on the future criminal behavior of adolescent offenders

prosecuted in adult criminal court. The basic question addressed in this body of research is as follows: Does transferring juvenile offenders to the adult criminal justice system produce a specific deterrent, criminogenic, or null effect?

Unfortunately, despite two decades of research and the meta-analytic techniques employed in this study, a definitive answer to this question remains unclear.

Nevertheless, when the results of this meta-analysis are considered along with findings from other relevant research conducted during the past 20 years, it seems clear that the practice of treating juveniles as adults should be limited to the most serious, violent, and chronic offenders, who are in need of lengthy incapacitation for the sake of public safety.

Theoretical Rationale

As noted by Zane et al. (2016), beneficial effects from waiving youthful offenders to adult court are possible through both general and specific deterrence.

Deterrence as the basis of crime and delinquency policy centers on the belief that offending can be prevented, reduced, and controlled when the costs of breaking the law are perceived as being greater than the benefits (Beccaria, 1986 [1764]; Nagin, 2013; Zimring and Hawkins, 1973). General deterrence occurs when the justice system threatens or inflicts punishment, and consequently, there is less overall crime than would otherwise occur if no penalties existed. From this perspective, juveniles in the general population will refrain from breaking the law because of a fear of punishment. Specific deterrence happens when known lawbreakers are caught and punished; subsequently, they refrain from committing

crime because they fear additional punishment. Under this mechanism, the experience of unpleasant sanctioning inhibits juvenile offenders from breaking the law again in the future.

In contrast to deterrence-based criminal justice, traditional juvenile court philosophy centered on serving the “best interests of children” and on providing “individualized treatment” that could save youthful offenders from growing up to be adult criminals (Myers, 2005). Children and youth were thought to be developmentally different from adults, physically, emotionally, and cognitively. They also were assumed to have diminished capacity to appreciate or control their actions, reducing their culpability or responsibility for illegal behavior. During the 1980s and 1990s, however, American juvenile justice policy shifted to a more punitive philosophy emphasizing accountability, deterrence, and incapacitation. In doing so, an assumption was made that rational juveniles would choose not to break the law as a result of either the threat or the receipt of harsher sanctions.

Concerning general deterrence, the weight of the evidence indicates that new or modified transfer laws do not lower juvenile crime rates (McGowan et al., 2007; Redding, 2008; Steiner, Hemmens, and Bell, 2006; Steiner and Wright, 2006; Zimring and Rushin, 2013). There is limited and conflicting research suggesting some juvenile offenders cease or reduce their offending once they reach the official age of adulthood (Lee and McCrary, 2005; Levitt, 1998). Prior to reaching adulthood, however, many youths may not be aware of existing or expanded transfer laws and the associated possibility of being prosecuted and incarcerated in the adult criminal system (Mears, 2003; Redding, 2003).

Moreover, other studies have revealed that adolescents are less future-oriented than adults and are less likely to consider the longer term consequences of their behavior (Cauffman and Steinburg, 2012; Scott and Steinburg, 2008).

With regard to specific deterrence, several comparative studies completed during the 1990s and 2000s found that juveniles processed in adult court exhibited either greater, more serious, and faster recidivism than similar youth retained in juvenile court or there was no significant effect from transfer (McGowan et al., 2007; Myers, 2005; Redding, 2008). Therefore, rather than specific deterrence, this body of research suggested either a criminogenic or null effect from transferring juveniles to adult court. Possible explanations for an increased likelihood of recidivism include stigmatization and negative effects from labeling juveniles as adult criminals; a sense of resentment or injustice on the part of juveniles from being tried and punished as adults; the learning of criminal attitudes and behavior while confined with adult criminals; and/or a decreased focus on rehabilitation and greater victimization within the adult system.

An inherent weakness with this research, however, is the possibility of selection bias (Smith and Paternoster, 1990). This means that transferred and nontransferred youth are systematically different in more ways than just their court of prosecution. Early comparative studies on the impact of juvenile transfer on recidivism used a combination of matching and statistical controls to adjust for selection bias, but as a result of data and analytical limitations, it is unclear whether those investigations achieved their goal (Loughran et al., 2010). During the past decade, propensity score analysis has become the preferred method of

dealing with selection bias (Rosenbaum, 2002; Rosenbaum and Rubin, 1983), which sets up further discussion of the meta-analysis contained in this issue.

Findings from the Meta-Analysis

By using detailed and appropriate meta-analytic procedures, Zane et al. (2016) assessed nine studies investigating the effect of juvenile transfer on recidivism. Initial results indicated five studies found evidence of increased general recidivism for transferred youth compared with retained juveniles; three studies identified no significant difference in recidivism outcomes; and only one study revealed transferred juveniles to have a smaller likelihood of recidivism than nontransferred offenders. The overall effect size for all nine studies was small and insignificant, suggesting transfer to adult court had a null effect across this body of research.

Further analyses focused on felony recidivism and violent felony recidivism. Results across the individual studies again were mixed but in the direction of either a null or criminogenic effect from transfer. The overall effect size for transfer on felony recidivism again was small and insignificant. For violent felony recidivism, however, the overall effect was significant in the direction of transfer having a criminogenic effect.

Based on these results, conclusions from this meta-analysis essentially would be the same as those from prior individual studies and qualitative reviews of the research on this topic. In other words, the initial evidence suggests that transfer to adult court, at best, produces a null effect on recidivism or, at worst,

produces a criminogenic effect that worsens the likelihood of recidivism. The strength of the current research, though, allowed for a deeper investigation of the data and produced findings that go beyond those obtained through prior research.

Specifically, Zane et al. (2016) considered the possibility of moderators that could explain the presence of heterogeneity across the study effects. Here, several important results emerged. First, for the two studies using propensity score analysis, the overall effect size was significant and in the direction of transfer to adult court *lessening* the likelihood of recidivism. Without these two studies, the overall effect size for transfer on general recidivism would have been significant and in the direction of being criminogenic. It also is noteworthy that both of these studies (Jordan, 2012; Loughran et al., 2010) were published in more recent times and were not included in most prior reviews of the literature on this topic. Second, research assessing judicial waiver (as opposed to other forms of juvenile waiver to adult court) found a significant criminogenic effect from transfer to adult court. For this type of waiver, it could be that being sent to adult court by a juvenile court judge does, in fact, cause increased future offending. It also is possible that juvenile court judges simply are effective in sending the highest risk or “worst” offenders to the adult system; after which, these youth exhibit greater recidivism (i.e., selection bias is the major explanation for the findings).

Relevant Research and Policy

Although violent juvenile crime arrest rates and violent juvenile victimization rates have fallen steadily since the mid-1990s, to levels similar to those of the mid-1980s (Snyder and Sickmund, 2006; Sickmund and Puzzanchera, 2014), current and prior research on juvenile transfer has up to this point not suggested that new or expanded juvenile transfer laws are the reason. Research has indicated, for example, that modern waiver laws have increased the number of younger offenders initially sent to adult court, but many of these youth subsequently are returned to juvenile court through reverse waiver or decertification proceedings (Jordan, 2006; Jordan and Myers, 2007; Snyder et al., 2000). In addition, offense seriousness and prior record are consistent predictors of juvenile transfer, but some studies have found high dismissal and decertification rates even for serious and violent offenders in adult court (Jordan, 2006; Jordan and Myers, 2007, 2011; Singer, 1996; Snyder et al., 2000). Finally, although violent youth in adult court tend to experience higher conviction and incarceration rates than youthful property offenders, case processing time is much longer in adult court than in juvenile court, and many transferred offenders are released back into the community on bail or after serving relatively short sentences of incarceration as teenagers (Bishop, 2000; Fagan, 1995; Jordan, 2006; Jordan and Myers, 2011; Myers, 2001, 2005; Podkopacz and Feld, 1996; Snyder and Sickmund, 2006).

It is also important to recognize practitioner views regarding the practice of juvenile transfer. Mears, Shollenberger, Willison, Owens, and Butts (2008)

surveyed experienced juvenile court judges, prosecutors, public defenders, court administrators, and chief probation officers from each of the nation's 300 most populated counties. A consensus emerged that the most effective juvenile justice policies and practices focus on individualized treatment and rehabilitation, graduated sanctions, and risk and needs assessment, whereas such approaches as reduced confidentiality of court records, transfer to adult criminal court, juvenile curfew laws, and parental accountability were not reported to be effective. Similarly, Myers, Lee, Giever, and Gilliam (2011) conducted a statewide survey of juvenile justice practitioners in Pennsylvania and found little support for increasing the number of youths transferred to the adult criminal justice system. Consistent with Mears et al. (2008), prosecutors stood out for their support of juvenile transfer, whereas probation officers, judges, and public defenders expressed less favorable opinions.

In addition, it is noteworthy that public support for transferring serious and violent offenders to adult court in the 1990s did not include providing juveniles the same sentences as adults or placing them in adult correctional facilities (Schwartz et al., 1993; Sprott, 1998, Triplett, 1996). Moreover, considerable public support exists for juvenile rehabilitation and intervention efforts, particularly for younger offenders (Cullen et al., 1998; Mears, Hay, Gertz, and Mancini, 2007; Moon, Sundt, Cullen, and Wright, 2000; Nagin, Piquero, Scott, and Steinberg, 2006). This public support for juvenile treatment and rehabilitation is reinforced by the modern evidence-based movement, which has produced a considerable body of research on effective juvenile justice policies, programs, and

practices that can prevent delinquency, reduce recidivism rates, improve behavioral outcomes, and increase public safety (Howell et al., 2014; Lipsey et al., 2010; Myers, 2013).

Returning to the topic of deterrence, a great deal of research in recent decades has established that the certainty of punishment produces stronger and more consistent deterrent effects than the severity of punishment (Nagin, 2013). This finding does not seem to strengthen the argument for deterrent effects from juvenile transfer as the focus of transfer tends to be on severity rather than on certainty (and swiftness). Although there is evidence that juveniles do, in fact, consider the risk of getting caught and the likelihood of being punished in deciding whether to commit a crime, studies have shown that the effect of these factors on youthful behavior is modest at best (Anwar and Loughran 2011; Loughran, Piquero, Fagan, and Mulvey, 2012; Matthews and Agnew, 2008). Furthermore, this body of research has indicated that risk and punishment assessment seems to matter the least for more serious and frequent juvenile offenders and that the threat of punishment has little or no deterrent effect among those youth who associate with a large proportion of delinquent peers. In other words, deterrence seems to be least effective for the types of juveniles who generally are believed to need it the most.

With regard to the active and rational consideration of risks and punishments, research on adolescent development has suggested young people simply do not think about and weigh the consequences of their actions in the same manner as adults (Cauffman and Steinburg, 2012; Fried and Reppucci, 2001;

Ortiz, 2003; Scott and Grisso, 1997; Scott and Steinburg, 2008). Youths targeted by deterrence-based policies typically are psychologically immature and have experienced a variety of negative life circumstances, which contribute to impulsive behavior, a limited perspective on life, and a propensity to engage in risk-taking to achieve short-term gains while disregarding long-term consequences. In sum, a lack of maturity, poor cognitive development, and a focus on rewards more than on punishments make the assumption of rationality problematic for most juveniles, particularly those most often targeted by deterrence-based delinquency policies.

Finally, contemporary U.S. Supreme Court decisions regarding the death penalty for juveniles (*Roper v. Simmons*, 2005) and life sentences for juveniles without the possibility of parole (*Graham v. Florida*, 2010; *Jackson v. Hobbs*, 2012; *Miller v. Alabama*, 2012; *Montgomery v. Louisiana*, 2016) were influenced by at least some of the research findings discussed earlier. These court decisions also are highly relevant to the topic of juvenile transfer. In ruling the death penalty and life sentences without the possibility of parole unconstitutional for juveniles, the Supreme Court held that “children are constitutionally different from adults in their level of culpability” and that the most severe punishment must be reserved “for the rarest of juvenile offenders, those whose crimes reflect permanent incorrigibility” (Rovner, 2016: 3). There may come a time in the not-too-distant future when the Supreme Court chooses to reexamine the constitutionality of juvenile transfer to adult court. Until that day occurs, the Court’s decisions and rationale in other recent juvenile cases seem consistent with

modern research findings and should be taken into account by those individuals guiding and administering juvenile transfer policies.

Conclusions

To establish the “true” effect of juvenile transfer on recidivism, the ideal research design would be a randomized experiment (Zane et al., 2016). Although randomized experiments have become much more common in contemporary criminal and juvenile justice research, it does not seem likely that randomization will be used in the context of juvenile transfer to adult court. In the absence of a randomized experiment, it is conceivable that juvenile transfer research employing propensity score analysis may be better able to both address confounding variables and establish a true effect of transfer that is in the direction of recidivism reduction. This remains to be seen through future research using this statistical technique. For now, “extant research does not provide a clear or consistent basis for determining whether transfer increases, decreases, or has no effect on recidivism” (Zane et al., 2016).

As long as there is a separate system of justice in place for dealing with juvenile offenders, which seems likely for the foreseeable future, there will be a perceived need and desire to treat some of these adolescents as adults (Myers, 2005; Myers et al., 2011). Few would argue that there are not certain older, chronic, and violent juvenile offenders who, for the sake of public safety, should be removed from society for long periods of time. Existing research has suggested, however, that extending the transfer of juveniles beyond those who are

deemed the “most deserving” is not good public policy. The real issue, assuming juvenile transfer will not be eliminated, is which adolescent offenders should be waived to adult court and how they should be processed and sanctioned once they get there.

Various sources have suggested that 75% or more of all transferred youth are 16 years of age or older (Bishop, 2000; Bishop and Frazier, 2000; Myers, 2001, 2005; Sickmund and Puzzanchera, 2014). Survey findings have revealed that practitioners support an age of 16 for holding individuals criminally responsible for violent crime (Myers et al., 2011). Other research has indicated an older age at offense consistently is associated with a greater likelihood of transfer (Bishop, 2000; Myers, 2005), and a younger age at offense has been associated with a greater likelihood of decertification (Jordan, 2006; Jordan and Myers, 2007; Snyder et al., 2000). Overall, these findings suggest that a minimum age of 16 may be appropriate as a standard to consider for juvenile transfer, at least for all crimes other than murder.

Next, transferring greater numbers of juvenile offenders has not been supported by existing research or practitioner views. Rather, a greater focus on violent recidivists and offenders who use firearms during the commission of their crimes seems justified. Research has shown that violent juvenile gun users typically receive more immediate attention and severe sanctions in adult court, as do adolescents with more serious and extensive offending backgrounds (Myers, 2001, 2005). In sum, older youths who both employ a firearm during the commission of a crime and display a notable delinquent background would seem

most appropriate as the focus of juvenile transfer policies, if the key goal is to advance public safety. This mainly would be achieved through the lengthier incarceration, incapacitation, and treatment that potentially can be provided to dangerous offenders through the adult correctional system.

More than a decade ago, I concluded that “the key lesson to be learned from more than 100 years of experience with transferring juveniles to adult court is that this practice is not a panacea for serious and violent offending” (Myers, 2005: 144). Little has changed to weaken that conclusion, and much has occurred to strengthen it. The threat and use of adult court sanctions does not seem to be a significant general or specific deterrent (pending further research), and the general public, U.S. Supreme Court, and contemporary research findings on juvenile justice policies, programs, and practices do not support a broad approach to treating juvenile offenders the same as adults. Rather, this practice should be reserved for older and more chronic and violent adolescents who pose the greatest threat to public safety.

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