

A substantial proportion of juveniles, especially those age 15 and younger, have impairments in adjudicative competence -- the capacities to understand legal proceedings, reason about legal decisions, and assist counsel -- at rates comparable to adults found incompetent to stand trial; developmental immaturity itself, apart from mental illness, can diminish trial competence.

Evidence strength: Moderate

Scientific consensus: Established

BOTTOM LINE

The forensic field broadly accepts that immaturity -- not just mental illness -- can compromise a juvenile's competence to stand trial, and that younger adolescents are disproportionately impaired; this recognition reshaped juvenile-competence law and practice. What remains debated is how to set standards and apply them to individuals, not whether immaturity-based incompetence is real.

WHAT THIS CLAIM DOES NOT SAY

- Does not claim that any particular juvenile is incompetent to stand trial -- competence is an individualized determination that requires a clinical-forensic evaluation.
- Does not claim that most juveniles are incompetent -- impairment is concentrated among younger adolescents and is a minority of youth overall.
- Does not claim that immaturity-based incompetence is identical to mental-illness-based incompetence, or that the legal competence standard is settled or applied uniformly across jurisdictions.
- Does not claim a specific age threshold for adjudicative competence; the relevant capacities develop gradually and vary between individuals.
- Does not claim that diminished competence bears on guilt or excuses conduct -- it concerns the fairness of the adjudication, not culpability.

SCOPE — WHERE IT HOLDS

A population-level developmental finding from standardized competence assessments comparing adolescents and adults. Impairment is concentrated among younger adolescents (roughly 15 and under) and those with lower cognitive ability, and reflects developmental immaturity rather than only mental illness or disability. It describes group rates and the developmental basis of competence concerns -- not any individual youth's competence, which requires an individualized clinical-forensic evaluation.

EVIDENCE SYNTHESIS

Adjudicative competence -- the capacity to understand the proceedings, reason about legal options, and assist counsel -- is, on average, lower in adolescents than adults, and is concentrated among the youngest. The MacArthur Juvenile Competence Study (Grisso et al. 2003) assessed roughly 1,400 juveniles and adults and found that those age 15 and younger were far more likely to show impairments at levels comparable to adults deemed incompetent, and that immaturity itself -- independent of mental illness -- can diminish competence. Replication in an adolescent-defendant sample (Viljoen & Roesch 2005) links the deficits to cognitive development. Unlike the interrogation cluster, no Supreme Court holding in this set squarely addresses juvenile adjudicative competence, so the claim carries no case link in the current library -- an honest gap, not an omission.

STUDIES (VERIFIED SOURCES)

SEMINAL

Grisso, T., Steinberg, L., Woolard, J., Cauffman, E., Scott, E., Graham, S., et al (2003). Juveniles' competence to stand trial: A comparison of adolescents' and adults' capacities as trial defendants. *Law and Human Behavior*, 27(4), 333-363.

Cross-sectional · N = 1393 · adolescents vs. young adults · doi.org/10.1023/A:1024065015717

MacArthur Juvenile Competence Study: juveniles 15 and under more often performed at impairment levels comparable to adults found incompetent; immaturity itself can diminish competence.

SUPPORTING

Viljoen, J. L., & Roesch, R (2005). Competence to waive interrogation rights and adjudicative competence in adolescent defendants: Cognitive development, attorney contact, and psychological symptoms. *Law and Human Behavior*, 29(6), 723-742.

Cross-sectional · N = 152 · 11-17 years · doi.org/10.1007/s10979-005-7978-y

Independent replication in 152 adolescent defendants tying weaker adjudicative competence and interrogation-rights comprehension to cognitive development.

Redlich, A. D., Silverman, M., & Steiner, H (2003). Pre-adjudicative and adjudicative competence in juveniles and young adults. *Behavioral Sciences & the Law*, 21(3), 393-410.

Cross-sectional · juveniles and young adults · doi.org/10.1002/bsl.543

Independent (non-Grisso) replication that adjudicative competence is diminished in juveniles and tracks age and suggestibility -- a second research program supporting the developmental competence deficit.

LIMITATIONS

The magnitude of the finding rests heavily on a single (very large) landmark study; the design is observational age-comparison rather than experimental; legal standards and instruments for juvenile competence vary across jurisdictions and remain debated; samples are U.S.-based; and group rates cannot establish that a particular youth is competent or incompetent, which requires an individualized clinical-forensic evaluation.

COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS

(1) That most juveniles are incompetent to stand trial -- impairment is a minority, concentrated among the youngest. (2) That competence concerns guilt -- it concerns whether the adjudication can be conducted fairly, not whether the youth committed the act. (3) That a youth who seems articulate is necessarily competent -- competence involves reasoning and assisting counsel, not just surface understanding.

EXPERT WITNESS NOTES

Use to establish, at the population level, that developmental immaturity can impair adjudicative competence and to justify an individualized competence evaluation for a young or developmentally immature client. Anchor to the MacArthur findings and their replication. Be candid that no Supreme Court decision in the juvenile-sentencing/interrogation line squarely governs adjudicative competence, that legal standards vary by jurisdiction, and that the group finding cannot substitute for an individual evaluation. The defensible use is to raise and frame the competence question, not to answer it for the specific defendant.