

## **Adolescent personality and character are still forming and are not reliable indicators of fixed adult character; most adolescents who engage in antisocial behavior, including serious offending, desist as they mature, so adolescent conduct is a poor predictor of irretrievable depravity.**

Evidence strength: High

Scientific consensus: Established

### **BOTTOM LINE**

There is broad agreement that most adolescents, even serious offenders, desist as they mature, and that adolescent character is not yet settled. The unresolved problem is prediction — science cannot reliably tell in advance which individual belongs to the small persistent subgroup.

#### **WHAT THIS CLAIM DOES NOT SAY**

- Does not claim every adolescent offender will desist, or that any individual is guaranteed to change.
- Does not claim adolescents bear no responsibility because their character is unformed.
- Does not claim science can predict, for a particular adolescent, whether they will reoffend or reform.
- Does not deny that a small subgroup shows persistent antisocial behavior across the life course.
- Does not claim malleability means treatment always succeeds, or that risk is zero.

### **SCOPE — WHERE IT HOLDS**

A developmental generalization grounded in longitudinal desistance research. It holds most strongly for the typical (adolescence-limited) pattern of offending, which is far more common than the persistent pattern; a small subgroup shows continuity into adulthood. Predictions are probabilistic at the group level and cannot identify which individual will desist or persist.

### **EVIDENCE SYNTHESIS**

Following more than a thousand serious adolescent offenders for years after court involvement, most reduced their offending substantially, with only a small "persisters" group continuing — and persistence tracked deficits in psychosocial maturity rather than a fixed criminal character. This fits the long-standing taxonomy distinguishing common, adolescence-limited offending from rare, life-course-persistent offending. The legal upshot, adopted in Roper, Graham, and Miller, is that a juvenile's crime is less likely than an adult's to reflect irretrievable depravity, which bears on both culpability and the constitutionality of the harshest, permanent sentences.

### **STUDIES (VERIFIED SOURCES)**

## SEMINAL

**Monahan, K. C., Steinberg, L., Cauffman, E., & Mulvey, E. P (2009). Trajectories of antisocial behavior and psychosocial maturity from adolescence to young adulthood. *Developmental Psychology*, 45(6), 1654-1668.**

Longitudinal · adolescence to young adulthood · doi.org/10.1037/a0015862

Longitudinal: persistent offending tracks arrested psychosocial maturation, not fixed character.

## SUPPORTING

**Mulvey, E. P., Steinberg, L., Piquero, A. R., Besana, M., Fagan, J., Schubert, C., & Cauffman, E (2010). Trajectories of desistance and continuity in antisocial behavior following court adjudication among serious adolescent offenders. *Development and Psychopathology*, 22(2), 453-475.**

Longitudinal · N = 1119 · serious adolescent offenders · doi.org/10.1017/S0954579410000179

1,119 serious offenders followed; most desist, only a small persister group continues.

**Moffitt, T. E (1993). Adolescence-limited and life-course-persistent antisocial behavior: A developmental taxonomy. *Psychological Review*, 100(4), 674-701.**

Review · doi.org/10.1037/0033-295X.100.4.674

Dual-taxonomy framework: most adolescent offending is adolescence-limited and transient.

## LIMITATIONS

Desistance research cannot prospectively identify which individual will persist; samples are often male and U.S.-based; self-report offending measures have known biases; and definitions of "desistance" vary across studies, affecting reported proportions.

## COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS

(1) That a serious crime proves a fixed, dangerous character — most serious adolescent offenders desist. (2) That science can pick out the future persister — it cannot at the individual level. (3) That "capacity for change" guarantees rehabilitation — it describes a population tendency, not certainty.

## EXPERT WITNESS NOTES

Anchor to the longitudinal desistance evidence and frame around irretrievable depravity (the Roper/Graham/Miller hook). Be explicit that the claim is about group-level transience and the impossibility of individual prediction — do not overstate as a promise that a specific defendant will reform. Concede the persistent subgroup candidly.

## LEGAL MAPPING

### RELIED ON BY

Roper v. Simmons — 543 U.S. 551 (2005)

Graham v. Florida — 560 U.S. 48 (2010)

Miller v. Alabama — 567 U.S. 460 (2012)

Montgomery v. Louisiana — 577 U.S. 190 (2016)

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