

Changes from head injuries associated with increases in youth offending

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A new longitudinal study looked at the impact on criminal persistence of head injuries, which have been linked to increased levels of offending, among adolescents and early adults. It found that changes in individuals with head injuries were associated with increases in self-reported offending, and with violent offending in particular.

Researchers have sought to identify the factors that promote or contribute to criminal [persistence](#)—that is, the likelihood that offenders will continue to offend. A new longitudinal study looked at the impact on criminal persistence of [head injuries](#), which have been linked to increased levels of offending, among adolescents and early adults. It found that changes in individuals with head injuries were associated with increases in self-reported offending, and with violent offending in particular.

The study, by a researcher at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, appears in *Justice Quarterly*, a publication of the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences.

"These results provide preliminary evidence that acquired neuropsychological deficits, and head injuries more directly, result in prolonged periods of criminal persistence," suggests Joseph A. Schwartz, professor of criminology and criminal justice at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, who authored the study.

The study drew on data from the Pathways to Desistance study of 1,336

previously adjudicated youth who were 14 to 19 years at the start and came from Philadelphia and Phoenix. The youth, who were mostly male and from a range of races and ethnicities, were interviewed over seven years about [criminal behavior](#) and contact with the criminal justice system. Nearly a fifth sustained one or more head injuries during the study and almost a third had sustained a head injury prior to the first interview.

In his work, Schwartz explored the effect of changes in individuals with head injuries on longitudinal trajectories of arrest and monthly reports of overall, violent, and nonviolent offending. He also considered factors such as impulse control, intelligence, pre-existing dysfunction of the prefrontal cortex, family support, and [socioeconomic status](#).

Schwartz found that head injury is five to eight times more common among individuals involved with the criminal-justice system than in the general population. He also found that youth engaged in higher levels of overall and violent offending following a head injury. While Schwartz notes that it is not possible to describe the association between head injury and violent offending as causal, he points to strong evidence of significant changes in trends in offending following a head injury.

A less consistent pattern was seen in the association between head injury and nonviolent offending, indicating that head injury may affect specific forms of criminal persistence differentially. Youth who had a head injury were more likely to be arrested (or commit more nonviolent offenses) than those who didn't have such an injury, but the likelihood of arrest for those individuals who sustained an injury did not increase following an injury.

Schwartz notes that his results should be interpreted with caution because he was unable to examine directly the deficits underlying the association between head injury and criminal persistence, and because

the measure of head injury was self-reported and did not address the severity of the injuries.

"The impact of head [injury](#) on offending behavior is likely the result of neuropsychological deficits that compromise normative brain development," suggests Schwartz. "We need more research into this critical issue, which would help us understand what sorts of treatment and intervention would work with people affected by [head](#) injuries and could contribute to reductions in overall crime."

More information: *Justice Quarterly* (2019). [DOI: 10.1080/07418825.2019.1599044](#)

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