Decision Making and Perceived Postdetention Success Among Incarcerated Youth

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This exploratory study seeks to better understand the link between decision-making skills and perceived postdetention success among incarcerated youth. The study uses data derived from surveys administered in 2001 of 197 incarcerated youth in two Nevada youth detention facilities. Results reveal that those youth possessing higher levels of decision-making competence scored higher on a postedetention success scale. This relationship was found while controlling for gender, age, ethnicity, number of arrests, and family conflict. Implications for detention-based education and prevention programming, as well as future research are discussed.

Although adolescent violence and crime rates have recently abated from their historically high levels, illegal and risky behaviors continue to be common among youth (Ellickson, Saner, & McGuigan, 1997; Moody & Lupton-Smith, 1999). This is a serious societal concern because delinquents are more likely than nondelinquents to suffer an assortment of problems in adulthood, including unemployment, alcoholism, and dependence on welfare (Kazdin, 1992). A variety of intervention approaches based on differing conceptual models have been initiated to help address this issue, but most have reported limited success (Cox, 1999; Cohen, Williams, Bekelman, & Crosse, 1995; Leitenberg, 1987; Latimer, 2001). Furthermore, institutional and aftercare programs aimed at helping juvenile offenders develop into useful, law-abiding citizens remain largely ineffectual, and recidivism continues to be unacceptably high (Josi & Sechrest, 1999; Krisberg, 1997). Given these findings, it has become a priority to identify innovative strategies and specific skills that enable juvenile offenders to successfully reenter society without reestablishing a pattern of delinquency.

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We do know some of the attributes of the highest risk group of juvenile offenders that make them particularly vulnerable to commit crimes repeatedly. These youth began their criminal misconduct at an early age, often have emotional and social difficulties and substance abuse issues, report high levels of family conflict, and have gang and other negative peer associations (Lattimore, Visher, & Linster, 1995; Stahl et al., 1999). In spite of these challenges, there is mounting evidence that certain strategies and programs can offer the promise of helping delinquents avoid future criminal acts (Sherman et al., 1998). Unfortunately, the vast majority of incarcerated youth still cycle back into their neighborhoods, families, and peer groups with few new skills to address the internal and external influences that originally helped land them in detention.

Several successful community reintegration programs have been reported in the literature, often combining a life-skills training approach with vocational/employment opportunities (Degnan & Degnan, 1993; Josi & Sechrest, 1999; O'Connor, Ryan, & Parikh, 1998; Palmer, 1991). Recently, Lipsey and Wilson (1998) conducted a meta-analysis of more than 200 juvenile offender intervention programs and found individual counseling, interpersonal skill building, and behavioral programs exhibited the most consistent, positive effects. Unfortunately, little is known about the critical components of the reentry process or the specific skills needed by incarcerated youth to make their transition from detention more successful. Decision making is one life skill that often has been linked to enhanced resiliency and decreased risk taking in the youth development and youth risk behavior literature (Furby & Beyth-Marom, 1992; Jacobs & Ganzel, 1993; Steinberg & Cauffman, 1996). Responsible decision-making skills clearly play an important role in a delinquent's ability to stay out of trouble, and at least one successful reintegration program has emphasized healthy decision making within an educational life skills model (Degnan, 1994). Although many authors have noted that adolescence is a transition period in which the pressure for problem solving and personal decision are increased, not all youth are equipped with the necessary prerequisite skills for effective decision making (Kazdin, 2000; Worell & Danner, 1989). We would argue that this is particularly true of juvenile delinquents.

Decision making can be defined as the process of making choices among possible alternatives. Historically, the skills considered important to effective decision making have been based on a normative model of decision making, which prescribes how decisions should be made. These skills include (a) identifying the possible options, (b) identifying the possible consequences that follow from each option, (c) evaluating the desirability of each of the consequences, (d) assessing the likelihood of each consequence, and (e)

making a choice using a decision rule (Furby & Beyth-Marom, 1992). Adolescent decision-making skills, however, are complicated by factors such as age, gender, cognitive skills, social class, race/ethnicity, family structure and dynamics, religiosity, temperament, and social/culture environment (Fuligni & Eccles, 1993; Mann, Harmoni, & Power, 1989; Schvaneveldt & Adams, 1983; Strauss & Clark, 1992). Other factors that affect adolescent decision making include conformity and compliance in relation to peers and parents, attitude toward and perception of risk, and temporal perspective (Scott, Reppucci, & Woolard, 1995). In addition, the ways in which youth use information in making decisions and the subjective value attributed to consequences is influenced by developmental and contextual factors (Fischoff, 1992; Kazdin, 2000; Steinberg & Cauffman, 1996).

Adolescent decision making has been studied in several contexts relative to delinquency, including adolescent criminal responsibility and culpability (Fried & Reppucci, 2001), informed consent (Ambuel & Rappaport, 1992), competence to stand trial (Woolard, 1998), and waiver of legal rights (Grisso, 1981). Almost nothing is known, however, regarding the critical role decision-making skills play in the postrelease success of incarcerated youth. The purpose of this study is to address this gap in the literature and explore the link between decision-making skills and perception of postdetention success among incarcerated youth. Specifically, we wanted to test our hypothesis that constructive decision-making skills are positively associated with perceived community reentry success. In addition, we also wanted to examine what aspects of decision making are most predictive of perceived postdetention success among incarcerated youth.

METHOD

Procedure

The data for this study derive from surveys of incarcerated youth in two Nevada secure youth detention facilities during the spring of 2001. The detention centers represent the only secure public detention options for sentenced youth of Clark County. The participants were selected based on their attendance at the facilities during the time of the survey administration. Although the selection of the groups of youth to be assessed was not random, the sample is an excellent representation of incarcerated youth from a large urban city's juvenile justice system. Administration dates were based on the times that were convenient to both the institutions' administrators and the researchers. Both centers are located in Clark County, one in the urban center

and the other outside of town in an isolated mountain area. The urban facility provides services to girls and boys and has a capacity of 112 youth. Tremendous growth in Clark County school-age children and the resulting increase in the number of youth offenders continually overcrowd this juvenile detention facility. The isolated, rural facility provides residential treatment only for boys between the ages of 12 and 18. Approximately 92 young men receive daily services at this facility, with an additional 80 receiving aftercare services. Some programmatic differences occur between the two facilities, although both provide opportunities for the therapeutic, education, social, medical, and recreational needs of youth. The rural facility functions as a sentencing option for more long-term offenders, and the youth sampled from this facility did have higher numbers of arrests and drug-related offences than did youth from the urban facility. No differences in age or ethnicity, however, were found between the two facilities.

The surveys were conducted in collaboration with the Clark County Division of Youth Services (CCDYS) to understand youth perceptions of their detention experience and to aid in the development of community reentry programming. Youth responded to a 124-item survey designed to assess perceptions of the overall facilities, staff, and programming as well as items related to anger management, decision making, violence, abuse, and gang affiliation. Surveys were administered by the authors and trained research assistants and completed during periods usually devoted to educational activities. Students who had difficulty comprehending items or sections of the survey had the survey translated or read to them by one of the survey administrators.

Because the incarcerated youth in this study were wards of the state, parental permission was not obtained. All participants completed informed consent forms, however, and to ensure accurate and honest responses, the surveys were anonymous and confidential. No incentives were offered for participation. In addition, youth were informed that the survey was voluntary and that they could skip any item they wanted. Of the youth present in the facilities on the day of administration, 94% chose to participate (11 declined).

Participants

The sample was composed of 197 male and female detainees. The participants came from two different facilities, one within the City of Las Vegas and another in a rural area outside of the city. Sixty-three of the participants were age 16 and older, and 89% were male. The ethnicity of the participants, assessed by a single item, was distributed as follows: 27% Hispanic American, 15% African American, 39% European American, 7% Asian/Pacific Islander American, and 13% multiethnic. Eighteen percent reported living

with both biological parents before their incarceration, 38% with only their mothers, 10% with only their fathers, 21% in stepfamilies, and 13% with grandparents, foster parents, or in other living arrangements. Ninety percent had been incarcerated in the detention facilities for 6 months or less. The participants were being adjudicated for the following crimes: other jurisdiction, 10.4%; assault/battery, 9.9%; drugs, 15.9%; vandalism, .5%; robbery/burglary, 20.3%; stealing cars, 12.1%, fighting, 1.6%; sexual offense, 4.4%; violation of parole/probation, 23.1%; and truancy, 1.6%. Another item assessed participants' prior arrest history: once, 6.4%; twice, 13.3%; three to five times, 32.4%; or six or more times, 48.0%.

Measures

The self-report instrument used in the subsequent analyses was developed for the purposes of this study and to provide information for CCDYS. The scales and items used were based on prior research, focus group discussions with CCDYS administrators, and focus groups with youth detainees. The survey was then piloted with a group of youth detainees for comprehension and readability. This piloting resulted in several content and formatting modifications.

Demographics. Gender and age variables were each assessed by one item on the survey. Ethnicity was assessed by one self-report item on the survey. For purposes of the regression analysis, ethnicity was divided into a series of dummy variables. The dummy variable for each ethnic group was coded as 1 (of the ethnicity) and 0 (not of the ethnicity).

Youth characteristics. To understand better whether the relationship between decision making and perceived likelihood to succeed was moderated by the characteristics of the individual juvenile offender, the length of detention and number of arrests were assessed by individual items. These variables were included in the analyses to control for their potential impact on perception of postdetention success, because this perception may be, in part, a function of time spent in the institution and level of involvement with the juvenile justice system.

Decision making. The Decision-making scale used for this study was developed as part of a national effort to evaluate a group of federally funded youth prevention projects (Polk & Evans, 1999). This evaluation effort brought together a committee of adolescent researchers who developed the scale based on concepts derived from current research and the adolescent

decision-making literature. Items were developed from the following decision-making constructs: "generating options, considering consequences, evaluating decisions" and "decision-making efficacy." Pilot testing with diverse youth resulted in the 17-item scale used here (see Appendix A). An open-ended question at the beginning of the scale asks the respondent to state a recent major decision that should be referenced when completing the scale (e.g., whether to drop out of school, stay drug free, or break up with a girlfriend/boyfriend). Although not used in the data analyses except as a validity check, this helps orient respondents to a major personal decision and aids in establishing validity and comparing samples. In this sample, no surveys were deleted due to minor decisions (e.g., what to wear that day) or flippant responses. To assess the internal reliability of the decision-making scale, a Cronbach's alpha analysis was conducted using the current sample. The analysis revealed an alpha level of .80.

To understand further what particular aspects of decision making affect a participant's perceived likelihood to succeed, three decision-making subscales were developed. The three subscales were derived from previously hypothesized subconstructs listed above and a principal component factor analysis conducted using the current data. The oblique rotation suggested that previously predicted constructs of generating options and considering consequences loaded on one factor or subscale. As a result, these two subscales were merged together to form a single subscale, which was labeled Generating Options and Considering Consequences. The Cronbach's reliability analysis on this eight-item subscale revealed an alpha level of .71. The second subscale suggested by both previous research and the factor analysis was Evaluation of Decision Making. The four-item subscale had a Cronbach's alpha of .74. The third predicted construct was decision-making efficacy. The factor analysis suggested that only items that assessed the participant's sense of control over decision making contributed to the subscale's cohesion. The items used in this new subscale were as follows: "When I get discouraged when making an important decision, I give up trying"; "I let other people make important decisions for me so it is not my problem"; and "I feel powerless when I make an important decision." The subscale was labeled Decision-Making Sense Of Control and had a Cronbach's alpha of .67.

Post-Detention Likelihood to Succeed Scale (PDLSS). For purposes of the current study, a scale was developed to assess detainees' perceived postdetention likelihood to succeed. The underlying postdetention likelihood to succeed construct was founded on four suppositions, which have been well established in the literature. Youth who reoffend or use substances are more likely to be delinquent, youth who reenter an antisocial social network are

more likely to be delinquent, youth who reduce conflict with others are less likely to be delinquent, and youth who are involved in prosocial activities are less likely to be delinquent. In accordance with these suppositions, a series of self-report items were developed to assess a detainee's perception of what will transpire once he or she is released (see Appendix B). These items asked participants to respond to prompts such as, "After leaving here, how likely do you think you will . . . hang out with your old friends?" To test internal reliability of the PDLSS, a Cronbach's alpha analysis was conducted using the current sample. The analysis revealed an alpha level of .87 for the 15-item scale (see Appendix B).

RESULTS

Descriptive statistics were conducted with each of the variables used in this study to better understand their respective distribution (see Table 1). As expected, the PDLSS was positively skewed in the direction of participants reporting a greater likelihood to succeed after detention.

To test the relationship between decision making and purported likelihood to succeed after release, one full-model multiple regression was conducted. Likelihood to succeed was regressed on decision making while controlling for gender, time in detention, number of arrests, age, and ethnicity. The analysis revealed a significant relationship between decision making and likelihood to succeed, $\beta = -.360$, $t(165) = -4.90$, $p < .000$; as reported decision-making skills increased, so did the perceived likelihood to succeed. This relationship was significant despite the statistical control of a variety of background youth demographic variables (see Table 2). The overall model accounted for 16% of the variance.

Other variables entered into the full regression model also had significant relationships with the PDLSS: time detained, $\beta = -.171$, $t(165) = -2.24$, $p < .05$, and Hispanic American, $\beta = -.186$, $t(165) = -2.33$, $p < .05$. The relationship between these variables and PDLSS, however, were not as robust as the decision-making variable.

To understand what aspects of decision making were most highly related to perceived postdetention success, a Pearson's r correlation was conducted with each of the three subscales, Decision-Making Sense of Control, Evaluation of Decision Making, and Generating Options and Considering Consequences; and the PDLSS. Both evaluation of decision making ($r = .267$, $p < .000$) and generating options and considering consequences ($r = .273$, $p < .000$) were significantly related to the PDLSS (see Table 3).

TABLE 1: Distribution of Selected Study Variables

Variable	*Minimum*	*Maximum*	*Mean*	*Standard Deviation*	*Kurtosis*
Time detained	1.00	5	2.29	1.02	–.940
Number of arrests	1.00	4	3.22	.908	.043
Decision-making scale	1.71	3.94	2.75	.452	-.219
Post-Detention Likelihood to Succeed Scale	1.00	3.47	1.82	.493	.243

TABLE 2: Results From a Multiple Regression Equation Predicting Post-Detention Likelihood to Succeed Scale (PDLSS) From Decision Making

	PDLSS
Decision making	.360***
Number of arrests	–.120
Time detained	–.171*
Age	.050
Sex	.063
African American	–.038
Asian American	–.138
Hispanic American	–.186*
Native American	–.039
Multiethnic	–.146
Adjusted R^2	.157

NOTE: All values are betas except for the adjusted R^2. Gender is coded 0 = male and 1 = female. Ethnicity is coded 0 = not of the ethnicity and 1 = of the ethnicity; for example, non-Hispanic = 0, Hispanic = 1. Although some variables were intercorrelated, there was no serious problem with mulitcollinearity.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .005$. ***$p < .000$.

DISCUSSION

Present results reveal the importance decision-making skills can have on perceived postdetention success: Those youth possessing higher levels of decision-making competence scored higher on the postdetention success scale. This relationship was found while controlling for gender, age, ethnicity, number of arrests, and family conflict. Adolescence is a time when important decisions are made based on little life experience and that have lifelong consequences. For incarcerated youth about to be released back into their neighborhoods and families, this is especially true. Therefore, it is essential to determine the best ways of enhancing effective decision-making skills among this population.

TABLE 3: Results From a Pearson's *r* Correlation Between Decision-Making Subscales and the Post-Detention Likelihood to Succeed Scale (PDLSS)

	PDLSS
Sense of decision-making control (*r*)	–.083
Evaluation of decision-making (*r*)	.267***
Generating options and considering consequences (*r*)	.273***

*$p < .05$. **$p < .005$. ***$p < .000$.

Interventions designed to enhance adolescent decision-making skills have led to outcomes such as higher levels of school retention, economic self-sufficiency, and more responsible sexual behavior with pregnant and parenting adolescents (Donnelly & Davis-Berman, 1994); lower mean tobacco use at the 2-year follow up of a substance abuse prevention program (Snow, Tebes, Arthur, & Tapasak, 1992); and higher levels of positive prosocial behavior and lower levels of antisocial, self-destructive and socially disordered behavior at a 4- to 6-year follow up of a social decision-making and problem-solving program (Elias, Gara, Schuyler, Branden-Muller, & Sayette, 1991). Unfortunately, very few interventions have focused primarily on enhancing decision making among delinquent or incarcerated youth.

In a model for teaching decision making, Wilson and Kirby (1984) included the following skills: defining the decision to be made, educating oneself (gathering facts and generating alternatives), considering options, identifying a choice, designing a plan to carry out the decision, and evaluating the decision. This model addresses goal-directed decision making heavily reliant on sequential planning strategies. It appears, however, that different styles of decision making may be appropriate for different types of decisions. Although cognitive aspects of decision making are considered important to adolescent risk taking (Lavery, Siegel, Cousins, & Rubovits, 1993), risk-related decisions require additional considerations (Furby & Beyth-Marom, 1992). For example, in-the-moment emotionally sensitive or stressful situations may entail different decision-making processes than long-range career decisions (Larson & Richards, 1994; Siegel, et al., 1994). In addition, some authors have proposed that adolescents may make certain decisions as a way to regulate their emotional state, attempting to minimize their sense of distress or embarrassment, rather than following rational, goal-directed decision models (Jacobs & Ganzel, 1993). Emotional, ambiguous, and stressful situational contexts, of course, are often the ones most associated with risk taking and delinquent activities.

Trad (1993) suggested that although decision-making skills alone do not account for risk behavior, it is important to evaluate adolescents' planning and decision-making skills to determine possible areas in need of intervention. He also suggested it is important to assist adolescents in adopting a future orientation, so that both short-term and long-term goals and consequences are considered before making a choice. This is particularly challenging for delinquents (who by definition have histories of poor decisions) because there is a precedent setting aspect to decision making, whereby past and current decisions influence future choices. In addition, decisions are not made in a vacuum; feedback and prior experience influences decision making. Indeed, the consensus of the literature on this topic is that decision making is a complex, nonlinear process, and skills develop as one matures and with experience (Mann et al., 1989). Laden with negative decision-making experience and poor prosocial peer support networks, delinquents are clearly at elevated risk to not develop the competent decision-making skills needed for successful transition into adulthood.

Delinquent populations also often have multiple risk factors that make it more challenging to make healthy, appropriate life decisions. Deficits in self-esteem and histories of parental and peer conflict are particularly damaging to competent decision-making skills because both internal (such as locus of control and self-concept) and external factors (such as relationships with parents and peers) have been found to influence decision making (Mann et al., 1989). Delinquents also are known to have higher prevalence rates of substance abuse, mental illness, and violent behavior—all of which impair decision-making ability (Kazdin, 2000). Because competent decision-making skills are a powerful protective factor for adolescents (Elias et al., 1991), they hold the promise to help ameliorate the risk factors delinquents possess. Present results appear to provide support for this argument.

Present results also have implications for detention-based education and prevention programming. Decision-making skills are an essential aspect of optimal adolescent development. It is necessary for adolescents to be given the opportunity to practice making personally meaningful choices if they are to be effective decision makers (Jacobs & Ganzel, 1993); cognitive skill attainment alone does not guarantee that adolescents will transfer such skills to real life situations (Keating, 1990). Thus, programming with incarcerated youth as well as community reentry programs and parole supervision need to focus more on the importance of the experiential component in competent decision-making development. Alternative programming to detention that emphasizes responsibility and accountability may ultimately lead to less recidivism than incarceration or boot camp programs, with their priorities centered on compliance and submission. This may be particularly critical for

first-time or entry-level offenders where opportunity exists to intervene before they enter middle adolescence (15 to 16 years old), a period known for increased susceptibility to peer pressure and poorer decision-making compared to younger and older adolescents (Fried & Reppucci, 2001). Unfortunately, some choices and options are more open to some adolescents than to others; delinquents and those working with them must learn to recognize and cope with possible societal constraints on their choices (including labeling, prejudice, poverty, and prior choices that have led to constricted options, i.e. school dropout). Interventions designed to increase the set of vocational and life skills of delinquents as well as options available for productive experiences are likely to increase postdetention success.

In summary, present results indicate that decision-making skills are associated with incarcerated youth's postdetention intentions regarding risky and illegal behaviors as well as their beliefs about their ability to be successful upon release. We also found the specific subskills of generating options and considering consequences and evaluating decisions to be significantly related to perceived postdetention success. This is congruent with prior studies that found that youth with impulsive decision-making styles are more likely to be involved with risky behaviors than those who carefully evaluate options and consequences (Jacobs, 1998). Taken together, this suggests that the opportunity for practice of these subskills, particularly among impulsive youth, may prove a promising direction to those interested in enhancing decision-making skills among delinquent populations. More research is needed, however, to understand how best to incorporate decision-making skill building into programming with this population, what contexts appear to be the most effective, and how these skills should be taught.

Because this study relied on self-report data, our measures are vulnerable to overreporting and underreporting biases. Sensitive self-report data among youth, however, have been previously studied and accepted as valid and reliable (Johnston, O'Malley, & Bachman, 1991). The limitations of the present investigation suggest a number of avenues for future research. In particular, the study was cross-sectional in nature. Causal direction among the variables of interest, therefore, cannot be established. Longitudinal studies are needed in this regard, particularly research that tracks incarcerated youth as they transition out of the structured setting of incarceration and back into their communities where the ramifications of the poor decision making can be devastating. Also, due to the nature of our sampling frame and the fact that young males predominately populate detention systems, we had few female respondents. Thus, although our analyses controlled for gender, present results should be considered tentative until they can be replicated with larger samples of incarcerated adolescent females. In this article, we have argued

that competent decision-making skills are a potentially powerful protective factor against recidivism. Few would argue with such a statement. Additional research is needed, however, regarding the constellations of risk factors, including learning disabilities, mental disorders, and substance abuse, that affect decision-making competency and postdetention success as well as the link between our measures of decision making and perceived postdetention success with longitudinal indices of recidivism.

APPENDIX A
Decision-Making Scale

Participants were asked to list an important decision that they have made or are making and to respond to the following items with this important decision in mind. Responses were rated on the following scale: *not true for me*, *kind of true for me*, *true for me*, and *very true for me*.

- I think of all the results, both good and bad, before making an important decision.
- I feel confident in my ability to make important decisions.
- When I make an important decision, I come up with lots of possible choices.
- When I am unhappy with the outcome of an important decision, I think about what I could do differently next time.
- When I get discouraged when making an important decision, I give up trying.
- I don't think about the future when making an important decision.
- When I make an important decision, I choose the first thing I think of that seems like it will work.
- After I have made an important decision, I think about it to see if I am happy with the way it turned out.
- When I make an important decision, I think how my decision might help or hurt another person.
- I think of as many choices as I can before I make an important decision.
- I let other people make important decisions for me so it is not my problem.
- When I am faced with making an important decision, I think about the way past decisions have turned out.
- I think about how the important decisions I make today, good or bad, will affect my life in the future.
- I feel powerless when I make an important decision.
- When I like how an important decision turns out, I try to make other decisions in the same way.
- Most of the important decisions I make turn out well.
- When I make an important decision, it isn't worth worrying about choices because things usually work out for themselves.

APPENDIX B
Post-Detention Likelihood to Succeed Scale

After leaving here, how likely do you think you will (*very likely*, *likely*, *unlikely*, *very unlikely*)

- complete high school
- hang out with your old friends
- hang out with friends that you have met in the facility
- hang out with different friends who never get in trouble
- use drugs and alcohol
- avoid problems that might lead to committing a crime
- work harder to get along with other adults
- work harder at not getting into fight with other youths
- spend more time with positive family members and adult people who will help you avoid trouble

How much do you agree with the following statements about yourself (*strongly agree*, *agree*, *disagree*, *strongly disagree*):

- After I leave here, I won't be doing any crimes.
- After I leave here, I will be getting involved in more positive activities (church youth groups, school activities, boys and girls club, etc.).
- After I leave here, I think I will return.
- After I leave here, school can help me reach my goals.

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