The Pathways to Desistance Study: Analyzing the Life Event Calendar Data for Substance Abuse Research

(3 day workshop, July 28 -30, 2014)

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Course Description

Studies of adolescents indicate a high degree of co-occurrence of delinquency (both self-reported offending and official arrests), and substance use problems (i.e., high or problematic levels of substance use or the presence of a diagnosable substance use disorder). It is estimated that at least 1/3 of all serious juvenile offenders, including those not arrested for drug-related offenses, have substance use disorders. Adolescents with co-occurring substance use problems and delinquency are at highest risk for continued criminal activity, are likely to have substance use problems in adulthood, and are likely to be unsuccessful in substance abuse treatment.

Despite this general picture of poor prognosis, we also know that many substance-abusing juvenile offenders will desist from one or both of these behaviors in early adulthood. What we do not know is how these processes of desistance operate or what factors influence them. Without longitudinal information about the interaction of these two antisocial behaviors over time, there is only limited information available to guide the design of effective programs and policies for these adolescents who use large amounts of resources and who drive much of the policy debate in juvenile justice (Greenwood et al., 1996). Thus, there is a strong need to examine the reciprocal, over-time links between substance use and criminal behavior.

The Pathways to Desistance study is a multi-site, longitudinal study of 1,354 serious adolescent offenders as they make the transition from adolescence into early adulthood. The enrolled youth were at least 14 years old and under 18 years old at the time of their committing offense and were found guilty of a serious offense (predominantly felonies, with a few exceptions for some misdemeanor property offenses, sexual assault, or weapons offenses). Each study participant was followed for a period of seven years past enrollment, providing a comprehensive picture of life changes in a wide array of areas over the course of this time. Information gathered from the Pathways to Desistance study offers an excellent opportunity to examine some of the issues related to substance use and offending during the period of transition from adolescence to adulthood (average age 16 – 23). Other data regarding life changes over the follow up period will also be discussed.

During this three-day workshop, attendees with gain a thorough understanding of study methods and sample (1/2 day) as well as the measures (1/2 day) in the Pathways to Desistance study. Special emphasis will be given to the life-event calendar data. We will take a full day to describe how the life-event calendar data were collected, how it is organized across the multiple calendar datasets,
and how to use it in conjunction with the data collected in regular, time-point interviews of the research participants. We will use the third day of the workshop to discuss possible areas of investigation that could be pursued using the Pathways study data and to provide specific data-related advice regarding questions of interest to the workshop participants. Workshop participants will be encouraged to identify specific areas that they are interested in pursuing and to develop proposed research questions in these areas. We plan to use a combination of lecture, discussion, and hands-on exercises throughout the three days.

**Readings:**


**Day 1:**

**Morning session:**

This session will provide an overview of the Pathways study methods and sample. Recruitment strategies, attrition, interviewing methods and schedules, and characteristics of the samples will be covered.

**Afternoon session:**

This session will describe the major constructs guiding data collection. The overall theoretical model and the domains of measurement over time will be presented. Particular emphasis will be given to the information collected regarding substance use and other mental health disorders.
Day 2:

Morning session:

This session will describe the life–event calendar approach in general and the logic behind its application and use. We will also provide examples of how the Pathways calendar data were collected as well as information about how the data sets are structured and organized. This session will focus on the methods used to collect the life-event calendars and will include discussion from the participants about this approach, its overall utility, and its limitations.

Afternoon session:

This session will present more detailed information about each of the calendars and available constructs connected with each calendar. Particular emphasis will be given to the calendars that were identified by workshop participants as areas of interest (e.g. legal and illegal work, offending). We will also discuss how the calendar data can be used in conjunction with the period recall data (e.g. substance use in the last six months) and the potential value of adding the calendar data to these time point measures in analyses.

Day 3

Morning session:

During this session, we will walk through illustrative examples of questions that have been addressed with the Pathways data to date. We will show how different data sets were structured and manipulated to answer the question at hand (e.g. outcomes during the aftercare period adjacent to an institutional stay, overlap of victimization and self–reported offending). These examples should provide templates for addressing certain questions identified by the participants.

Afternoon session:

This session will focus on specific questions from workshop participants about the issues that they have identified for investigation using the life-calendar data. We will ask selected participants to provide short summaries of their plans for using the data and ask for feedback/suggestions from workshop attendees and the instructors.