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Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee on Crime, Terrorism, and Homeland Security, thank you for the opportunity to speak with you this afternoon about inmate rehabilitation and successful release planning. Today I share with you some of what behavioral science research can contribute to the policy discussion about responses to youth.

First, adolescents are developmentally different from adults in ways relevant to delinquency and crime. This statement is not based in stereotype or intuition but in science. Although the belief that adolescents are different may not be different longstanding, the news is that advances in behavioral and brain research support this fundamental tenet of the juvenile justice system and its approach to rehabilitation. To illustrate, I will focus on two major aspects of adolescents' brain and behavior functioning.

The socio-emotional network refers to brain systems responsible for emotion, rewards, and social processing, which undergo major changes in early adolescence, also a time of increased sensation-seeking, increased/easier emotional arousal, and increased attentiveness to social information. So, adolescence is characterized by a socio-emotional system that is easily aroused and highly sensitive to social feedback.

At the same time, adolescence is characterized by a still-immature cognitive control system. Although intellectual ability peaks by about age 16, the capacity for planning, future orientation, and the ability to regulate oneself involve prefrontal and anterior cingulate portions of the brain that continue to develop well into young adulthood.

Sometimes called the “CEO” of the brain, these areas activate during what we might consider mature or deliberate thinking – the abilities to identify and consider future consequences, understand possible sequences of events, and control impulses.

As a result, adolescents are less able to control impulses, less able to resist pressure from peers, less likely to think ahead, and more driven by the thrill of rewards. Moreover, the effects of immaturity are probably even greater outside the control of a laboratory.

Compared to adults, juveniles’ cognitive capacity is undermined by that socioemotional system in circumstances that are not controlled, deliberate, and calm – circumstances that may encompass much of adolescent delinquency risk. Theory suggests that with maturation comes the integration of the two systems, bringing their influence into greater balance and perhaps contributing to the reduction in risky behavior we see in adulthood.

Let me be clear – the advances in brain imaging techniques are exciting and offer windows into the structure and function of the brain. However, research is still at the early stages. We cannot definitively tell you that certain regions are “responsible” for risky behavior, immature thinking, or delinquent acts. We can tell you that our initial brain research is consistent with the decades of behavioral research documenting important differences in the cognitive capacities, psychosocial development, and behavior of adolescents compared to adults.

Now, there are certainly adults who engage in risky behavior or act immaturely. The crucial distinction, though, is that adolescents *as a class* are more likely to demonstrate

these deficiencies due to normative development that is incomplete; most will mature into law-abiding, productive adult citizens. As a result, the research on developmental differences challenges policymakers and practitioners to sort and manage a young population that can appear simultaneously adult-like and immature. So, what guidance can developmental research provide?

I believe the body of behavioral and brain research calls into question assumptions made by some that juveniles are simply “miniature adults” incapable of, or unlikely to change, simply because they are capable of committing certain offenses. Prior to age 16, they are different intellectually and emotionally. After age 16, they are still different emotionally.

The importance of considering rehabilitation and amenability to treatment as we consider youth in long-term incarceration is a critical issue, particularly for youth incarcerated as adults. Youths’ foreshortened time perspective, for example, can mean that the same amount of time in isolation imposed for disciplinary sanctions for adults can have a more severe or excessive impact on youth. One study comparing the perceptions of youth transferred to the adult system with those retained in the juvenile system found youths reported that juvenile sanctions had an effect because they gained something (e.g., skills, hope, services); adult sanctions tended to have an effect on attitudes and behavior because they cost something (e.g., loss of hope, safety, respect). Sanctions imposed on juvenile offenders should hold them responsible, but should not harm them in ways that imperil their development.

It is incumbent upon researchers and policymakers to ask questions about outcomes that extend beyond recidivism to include pathways of development (e.g., appropriate relationship formation, individual capacities) and positive engagement in the larger society (e.g., employment, contributions to society). The emphasis on, and possibility for, rehabilitation is crucial. These research findings, at a minimum, support the importance of a developmentally appropriate juvenile justice system that simultaneously works to prevent and reduce offending while augmenting the opportunity for youth to follow a successful and productive developmental pathway.