

Statement to the Committee on Juvenile Justice and the Committee on Courts and Legal Services, New York City Council

January 19, 2017

Developmental neuroscience research shows that brain areas such as the prefrontal cortex that are involved in deliberative decision-making and the regulation of emotions and impulses are among the last to develop, continuing to mature into young adulthood.

During adolescence, the brain is under construction and is particularly sensitive to life experiences. Psychological and social skills that develop during this period tend to persist into adulthood. This heightened sensitivity and malleability of the brain presents a window of opportunity for behavioral change.

The adolescent brain should be particularly amenable to rehabilitation. In adolescents demonstrating risk for criminal or antisocial behavior, interventions that provide opportunities for prosocial interactions, both in the community and with positive role models, can bolster healthy development.

Conversely, incarceration places teens in an environment where they lack the social opportunities to practice prosocial behavior and to learn to regulate their emotions and impulses. Moreover, exposure to the traumatic experiences endemic to jails and prisons may be particularly detrimental to teens' long-term outcomes. Neuroscientific evidence suggests that trauma experienced in adolescence has a lasting impact on behavior and brain development.

Instead of hindering growth, juvenile justice policy should aim to reduce recidivism, promote rehabilitation, and implement interventions during this formative stage of development.

Alexandra Cohen, B.S., Weill Cornell Medical College, New York, alibc90@gmail.com

Catherine Hartley, Ph.D., New York University, New York, cate@nyu.edu

Wei Ji Ma, Ph.D., New York University, New York, weijima@nyu.edu

The Scientist Action and Advocacy Network (ScAAN) is a New York-based group of scientists who partner with non-partisan and partisan organizations that are creating positive social change. scaan.net.