

Settling Down and Aging Out: Toward an Interactionist Theory of Desistance and the Transition to Adulthood¹

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Conceptions of adulthood have changed dramatically in recent decades. Despite such changes, however, the notion that young people will eventually “settle down” and desist from delinquent behaviors is remarkably persistent. This article unites criminology with classic work on age norms and role behavior to contend that people who persist in delinquency will be less likely to make timely adult transitions. The empirical analysis supports this proposition, with both arrest and self-reported crime blocking the passage to adult status. The authors conclude that desisting from delinquency is an important part of the package of role behaviors that define adulthood.

The transition from youth to adulthood represents a pivotal passage in the life course, typically marked by several meaningful transitions: entrance into the labor force, movement toward residential and economic independence, and independent family formation. Although movement away from delinquency also characterizes this transition (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990; Sampson and Laub 1993), extant theory and research have

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yet to consider desistance as a marker of adult status. We here propose and test an interactionist model that emphasizes how delinquency and contact with the justice system shape the transition to adulthood.

Two related lines of research link the movement away from crime to traditional markers of adult status such as employment and marriage: (1) a well-established body of work specifying how these transitions affect crime or desistance (Horney, Osgood, and Marshall 1995; Laub, Nagin, and Sampson 1998; Uggen 2000; Laub and Sampson 2003) and (2) a burgeoning new literature tracing how crime and punishment, in turn, slow transitions to work (Hagan 1991; Western and Beckett 1999; Pager 2003; Western 2006) and family formation (Hagan and Dinovitzer 1999; Western, Lopoo, and McLanahan 2004; Lopoo and Western 2005).

Apart from its effects on other adult transitions, however, desistance from delinquency may itself constitute a dimension or facet of the transition to adulthood. The term *juvenile delinquency* generally refers to law violation committed by persons who have not yet reached the age of majority—typically age 18 or 19 in the contemporary United States. For most criminal offenses, the age-crime curve reaches its peak during the juvenile period (Hirschi and Gottfredson 1983). Although our interest extends beyond adolescence, we deliberately use the term *delinquency* throughout this article to emphasize the historical and cultural link between criminality and youth—and the age-inappropriateness of delinquent behavior in adulthood.

Classic research on age norms (Neugarten, Moore, and Lowe 1965) has shown how widely held beliefs about age-appropriate behaviors guide processes of adult socialization. Consistent with this research, we draw on work from the symbolic interactionist tradition (Mead 1934; Matsueda 1992; Maruna 2001; Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph 2002) to argue that adults who persist in delinquency will recognize the age-inappropriateness of their behavior and internalize the appraisals of others, especially when delinquent behavior is made public through criminal justice system processing. The result of this recognition and internalization is a delayed passage to adult status, both objectively and subjectively.

Although U.S. correctional populations have risen to historically unprecedented levels (U.S. Department of Justice 2009), many people rarely encounter the criminal justice system. How can desistance constitute a facet of the transition to adulthood when some individuals have no criminal history from which to desist? First, a long line of self-report research establishes that almost all adolescents engage in some form of delinquency (Porterfield 1943; Wallerstein and Wyle 1947; Short and Nye 1957; Elliott and Ageton 1980; Gabor 1994) and that rates of both official and self-reported delinquency decline precipitously during the late teens and 20s (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990; Laub and Sampson 2003). According to

the national Monitoring the Future survey, for example, most U.S. high school seniors have used illicit drugs (primarily marijuana) and participated in binge drinking (Johnston et al. 2009). By age 30, however, the vast majority of these young people will have ceased or significantly reduced their illegal substance use and “settled down” into adult work and family roles (Bachman et al. 2002).

Second, as with other markers of adulthood, such as marriage, child-bearing, and financial self-sufficiency, desistance alone is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for attaining adulthood. It is not any single marker in isolation—for instance, many have children but never marry—but rather a constellation of behaviors that constitutes adult status. We therefore place movement away from crime into the context of these more traditional indicators, examining the extent to which delinquency is embedded in and related to adult status. In doing so, we build on classic and emerging work on the changing nature of adulthood (Rindfuss, Swicegood, and Rosenfeld 1987; Buchman 1989; Furstenberg et al. 2004; Arnett 2007) and criminal punishment as an increasingly common life event in the United States (Pettit and Western 2004).

Before testing these ideas, we first draw connections between criminological work and research on the behavioral and subjective dimensions of adult status. We conceptualize *behavioral* adult status in terms of the events or role behaviors long associated with adulthood, such as marriage and full-time employment (Hogan and Astone 1986; Modell 1989; Goldscheider and Goldscheider 1999). We conceptualize *subjective* adult status as self-perceptions regarding the extent to which people feel like adults (Furstenberg et al. 2004) and whether they feel “on time” or “off time” in making particular transitions (Hogan and Astone 1986). We then specify and test six hypotheses about desistance and adulthood using two longitudinal surveys with repeated measures of behavioral and subjective adult status.

AGE NORMS, DELINQUENCY, AND ADULT TRANSITIONS

Age norms are shared prescriptions and proscriptions regulating the timing of life transitions, especially the collective evaluations of when these transitions “should” or “ought to” occur (Marini 1984; Settersten and Mayer 1997). Neugarten et al. (1965) posited that expectations about adulthood and age-appropriateness are deeply embedded in U.S. culture, finding consistent evidence that behaviors deemed appropriate at one life course stage are deemed inappropriate at other stages. A pervasive network of informal social controls and accompanying sanctions thus govern the initiation, continuation, and cessation of social behavior, which is

internalized as a “social clock” (Neugarten and Hagestad 1976, p. 35) or “normative timetable” (Elder, Johnson, and Crosnoe 2003). This line of research extends beyond the prescriptive ages for adult status markers, such as settling on a career, to include widely shared age *proscriptions* regarding behaviors that range from returning home to live with one’s parents (Settersten 1998) to wearing a bikini in public (Neugarten et al. 1965).

Symbolic interactionist theories stressing social and temporal comparisons suggest two processes by which falling off time with respect to the social clock may vitiate adult status. First, interactionist accounts stressing social comparisons (Festinger 1954; Suls, Martin, and Wheeler 2002) would emphasize how those who delay transitions lag behind a key reference group—others their own age. Second, interactionist accounts stressing temporal comparisons (e.g., Fry and Karney 2002) would emphasize how people mark progress relative to earlier points in their own lives. Building on this interactionist tradition, social and temporal and reference comparisons should coalesce around a global assessment about whether one has achieved adult status (Shanahan, Porfeli, and Mortimer 2005; Johnson, Berg, and Sirotzki 2007).

Unquestionably, there is greater differentiation in the timing and sequencing of particular life markers today than in previous decades (Shanahan 2000). Nevertheless, contemporary research continues to find strong consensus about what it means to be an adult. In their analysis of General Social Survey data, Furstenberg et al. (2004) show that 90% of Americans believe that it is important for adults to be financially independent, to complete their education, to work full-time, and to support a family. Moreover, to be considered an adult, the vast majority of Americans think that these markers should be attained by the age of 30. Similarly, Settersten and Hagestad (1996) report that over 75% of their U.S. sample perceive timetables or deadlines for attaining behavioral markers such as getting married and establishing an independent residence. Both classic and emerging research thus suggest that part of becoming an adult is engaging in age-appropriate behavior and attaining life course markers associated with adulthood in a timely fashion.

To date, this line of inquiry has yet to consider age-linked behaviors such as delinquency. If ideas about age-appropriateness extend to crime, a cultural expectation of desistance should parallel cultural expectations about family formation and other transitions. While few have explicitly connected delinquency with adult status, there is some precedent for this idea in the psychological literature on the life course. In an influential series of articles, Jeffrey Arnett suggests that becoming an adult means relinquishing behaviors such as reckless driving that may be “condoned for adolescents but viewed as incompatible with adult status” (1994, p.

218). Using samples of students (1994) or respondents interviewed in public places (1997, 1998, 2003), Arnett finds that both young people and older adults (2001) regard avoiding illicit behaviors such as drunk driving, shoplifting, and vandalism as necessary criteria for a hypothetical person to attain adult status. Such findings do not appear to be limited to the U.S. context, since “norm compliance” is tied to conceptions of adulthood in nations such as Israel (Mayseless and Scharf 2003) and Argentina (Facio and Micocci 2003). Within the United States, this pattern appears to hold across racial and ethnic groups, since African-Americans, Latinos, whites, and Asian Americans all identify crime as incompatible with adult status (Arnett 2003).

Similarly, criminologists have long identified criminality with adolescence and desistance with adult maturation (Goring 1913; Glueck and Glueck 1945). In fact, G. Stanley Hall, whose two-volume treatise *Adolescence* (1904) ushered in the scientific study of child development, was a strong advocate for the separate juvenile court system emerging in the early 20th century (Rothman 1980, p. 210). Since this time, age norms have been formally codified in distinct juvenile and criminal codes. In keeping with these age-based behavioral standards, Greenberg (1977) and Moffitt (1993) have argued that some children and adolescents engage in delinquency precisely to mimic or attain the status accorded young adults. In the contemporary United States, for example, binge drinking is widely considered illegal and age-inappropriate for young adolescents, illegal yet age-appropriate for 20-year-olds, and legal yet age-inappropriate for those over 30 (McMorris and Uggen 2000; Schulenberg and Maggs 2002). Those who violate these and other age norms by persisting in delinquency are thus less likely to feel like adults or to be considered adults by others.²

To the extent that desistance is linked to other adult role transitions, a steep rise in criminal punishment may even play some part in a more general societal extension of the adolescent period. Furstenberg et al. (2004) attribute lengthening adolescence to the increased time needed to obtain jobs that support families. Similarly, Arnett (2000) identifies a distinctive “emerging adulthood” life course stage for those 18–25 in societies requiring prolonged periods of education. While most emerging adults thrive on the freedom characterized by this period, Arnett (2007, p. 71) notes that others “find themselves lost” and begin to experience mental health problems and other difficulties. Such problems are especially likely for vulnerable populations, including youths with a history of mental or

² To take but one illustration, a graduate student told us of a 30-year-old friend dating a man serving time on house arrest for graffiti. Not only did peers view the “tagger” as violating age norms, but his partner was also stigmatized for being involved with someone who had yet to desist from minor deviance.

physical health problems and those caught up in the justice system (Os-good et al. 2005; Arnett 2007).

Troubled transitions are especially common for those subject to harsh punishment and its attendant effects on life chances and self-perceptions (Uggen, Manza, and Behrens 2004; Western 2006; Wakefield and Uggen 2010). By interrupting schooling and employment, for example, incarceration inhibits financial self-sufficiency and prolongs dependency. The criminal justice system today cuts a wider and deeper swath through the life fortunes of young adults than it did a generation ago: more people are formally marked as criminals, and the long sentences they serve inhibit their future prospects (Pager 2003; Uggen and Wakefield 2005). Over 7.3 million Americans are currently under correctional supervision, up from 1.8 million as recently as 1980 (U.S. Department of Justice 2009).³ As longer sentences are meted out, young people remain in a dependent status for correspondingly longer periods. Not surprisingly, both prisoners and those self-reporting delinquency (Tanner, Davies, and O'Grady 1999) are off time relative to their age cohort in traversing the behavioral markers of marriage, full-time work, school completion, and independent residency (Western and Pettit 2002; Wakefield and Uggen 2010).

To illustrate the macrolevel association between contact with the justice system and adulthood, figure 1 plots incarceration rates against the percentage of young adults attaining status markers in the United States (the latter adapted from a similar analysis by Furstenberg et al. [2004]). Incarceration trends clearly coincide with rising numbers of young people who have yet to traverse the markers of self-sufficiency, marriage, parenthood, and school completion. Over the last 40 years, imprisonment has increased almost eightfold. At the same time, the number of 25-year-olds attaining all markers has declined significantly: a drop from 1960 levels of about 34% among men and almost 60% among women. Some portion of the latter decline is due to the rise of single-parent families, particularly among persons involved in the justice system, as well as more general trends in fertility and education attainment.

Although young adults across the socioeconomic spectrum are attaining traditional adult markers later than in recent generations, entanglement in the justice system is clearly delaying the adult transition for more Americans today than ever before. While incarceration represents the most invasive criminal sanction, any public justice system processing that similarly dramatizes the consequences of age-inappropriate behavior may affect self-perceptions of adult standing (Tannenbaum 1938; Lemert 1951).

³ As of December 31, 2007, 4,293,163 adults were under probation supervision, 824,365 were on parole, 1,512,576 were incarcerated in state or federal prisons, and 780,581 were held in local jails (U.S. Department of Justice 2009).

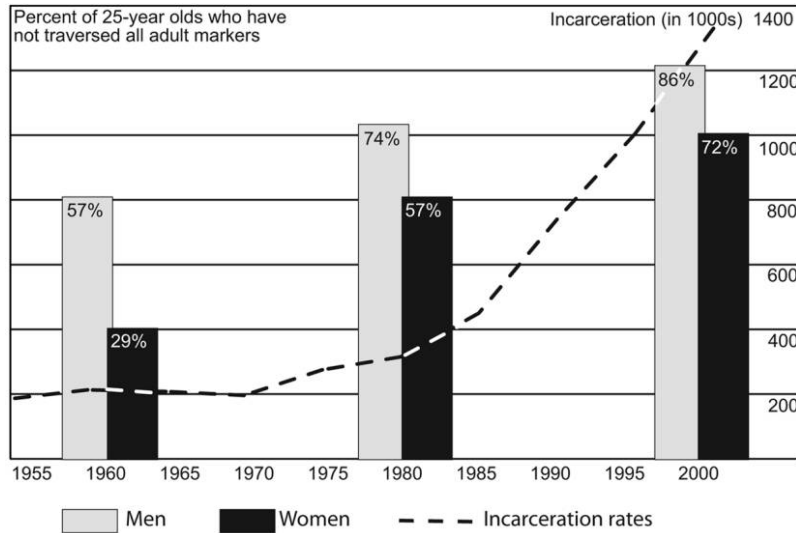


FIG. 1.—The behavioral transition to adulthood and incarceration, 1955–2000. Complete transitions include attaining financial self-sufficiency, marrying, having a child, and completing education. Men are defined as self-sufficient if they have entered the labor force and have established independent residence. Women are defined as self-sufficient if they have entered the labor force or have established independent residence. Incarceration rates include state and federal prisons (U.S. Department of Justice 2004). Transition data are taken from the U.S. Census, Integrated Public Use Microdata Series 1% sample in 1960, 1980, and 2000.

AN INTERACTIONIST PERSPECTIVE ON DELINQUENCY AND ROLE TRANSITION

We here elaborate and test an interactionist model of delinquency and the transition to adult status, uniting research on conceptions of adulthood (Arnett 2001, 2007; Furstenberg et al. 2004) with work on the life course consequences of crime (Laub and Sampson 2003; Pettit and Western 2004) and desistance (Maruna 2001; Farrall 2002; Bottoms et al. 2004). Before presenting specific hypotheses, we outline our conceptual model.

As noted, researchers are today specifying subjective as well as behavioral dimensions of adult status. The former line of research considers individual perceptions of adulthood, or the extent to which people believe that they are adults (Arnett 1994, 2003; Shanahan et al. 2005; Eliason et al. 2007). For example, those who are married or self-sufficient are more likely to see themselves as adults than those who are unmarried or dependent (Johnson et al. 2007). To link such work to the sociology of crime and punishment and to explain why “desisters” may feel more like adults than “persisters,” a conceptual model linking age norms, role behaviors, and self-perceptions is needed.

A basic societal consensus about the role transitions, responsibilities, and capacities that signify adult status informs individuals' perceptions about whether they "measure up" as adults (Arnett 2001; Furstenberg et al. 2004). Alongside traditional markers such as parenthood and full-time employment, we posit that delinquency—both serious and petty—is central to shared understandings of adult status. We stress petty as well as serious delinquency because the age-inappropriateness of the conduct, rather than its severity, guides feelings of adult status.

In assessing whether and how they measure up as adults, people consider both temporal comparisons, in the form of individual assessments of behavior relative to that of earlier in the life course, and social comparisons, in the form of individual assessments of behavior relative to that of important reference groups. Symbolic interactionist models have long recognized the importance of reference groups and the appraisals of others in shaping behavior and role identity (Blumer 1969; Felson 1985; Matsueda 1992). Developmental criminologists place particular emphasis on peer networks, since peers may supplant the family as the central reference group in adolescence, before the family or workplace rises in salience in adulthood (Warr 1998; Haynie 2001; Giordano et al. 2002; Laub and Sampson 2003; Giordano, Schroeder, and Cernkovich 2007).

From an interactionist perspective, the appraisals of significant others play a large part in determining how people come to see themselves (Kinch 1963). Consistent with Cooley's (1922) notion of the looking glass self (see also Matsueda 1992; Maruna et al. 2004), we suggest that those who persist in delinquency will be less likely to be seen as adults by their reference group (others' appraisals), more likely to perceive that others see them as less than adults (reflected appraisals), and thus more likely to understand themselves as less than adults (self-appraisals).

Structural symbolic interactionist theories provide a more general framework to explain the social psychology of subjective adulthood (Mead 1934; Stryker 1980; Wells and Stryker 1988; Stryker and Burke 2000). By this view, the self is organized into multiple identities corresponding to positions in the social structure. As people accumulate the responsibilities and perform the role behaviors commonly expected of adults, they begin to see themselves as adults in particular domains, such as the home or workplace. The collective adherence to domain-specific roles supports the development of a generalized adult identity that is played out across different situations. Over time and with the accumulation of behavioral transitions and the accompanying role adaptation across different domains, the generalized adult role grows more central to individual identity.

Empirical studies linking subjective perceptions of adulthood to adult role behavior generally support this account. Shanahan et al. (2005), for example, find that family transitions are key predictors of subjective adult-

hood and that some situations and settings are especially conducive to adult role behavior, such as spending time with colleagues in the workplace. These settings provide reference groups and foster behaviors that increase commitment to adult roles and encourage beliefs and attitudes culturally identified with maturity, thereby influencing perceptions of adult status. For example, accepting responsibility for oneself, achieving financial independence, and making decisions autonomously are associated with both adult role behavior and subjective perceptions of adult status (Greene, Wheatley, and Aldava 1992; Scheer, Unger, and Brown 1996; Arnett 1998).

Both delinquency and official sanctions, however, can disrupt adult role transitions, and those subject to such sanctions are well aware of this fact. In their influential Dover Borstal study, Bottoms and McClintock (1973, p. 381) found incarcerated young men to be prescient in forecasting the problems they would experience in traversing life course markers. Criminal punishment activates labeling processes that handicap offenders in marriage and labor markets (Thornberry 1987; Matsueda 1992; Matsueda and Heimer 1997, p. 178; Pager 2003; Maruna et al. 2004; Western 2006). Symbolic interactionist theories further suggest that “criminal role commitments” (Heimer and Matsueda 1994; Matsueda and Heimer 1997) encourage persistence in delinquent behavior, in part because the relevant reference groups tend to support criminal rather than conforming behavior (Giordano et al. 2002).

The key point is that many forms of delinquency are widely recognized as age-inappropriate for adults, and thus the continuation of such behaviors is inconsistent with adult status. At first blush, the contribution of minor delinquency to our conceptual model may seem counterintuitive. Yet less serious forms of delinquency, such as petty theft or defacing buildings, may be particularly likely to suppress feelings of adult status. It is precisely because of their petty—indeed childish—nature that such peccadilloes diminish feelings of adulthood, even in the absence of a formal response by the justice system. In contrast, more serious criminal acts are likely to invoke criminal sanctions, which themselves have implications for adult status.

With regard to such sanctions, George Herbert Mead (1918, p. 597) contrasted the “reconstructive attitude” of the then-emerging juvenile justice system with the hostile “retribution, repression, and exclusion” of the adult criminal courts (p. 590). For Mead, as for Durkheim ([1893] 1984), only the adult criminal courts were capable of “uniting all members of the community in the emotional solidarity of aggression” (p. 591). The common revulsion against criminality calls out the response of a generalized other—an organized attitude against crime—and thus affirms one’s own status as an adult of good standing. By this view, society cannot

treat older criminals with the same understanding and forgiveness accorded “wayward” children, since to do so would diminish social solidarity and shared conceptions of appropriate adult conduct. Indeed, even against the recent tide of “get tough” crime policies, the public supports the notion of a separate juvenile justice system and maintaining different standards for adult and youthful offenders (Mears et al. 2007). Such support for age-based disparate treatment signals widely held conceptions regarding the age-appropriateness of illicit acts.

Given the societal consensus on age-appropriate behavior and the expectations of settling down accompanying aging, persistence in delinquency undermines claims to adult status. A symbolic interactionist model suggests that conventional adult role behavior gradually fosters desistance by increasing commitments and thereby discouraging behaviors that may jeopardize the role. This view is largely consistent with the age-graded social control mechanisms hypothesized by Laub and Sampson (2003). In addition, however, interactionists specify processes of role taking and reflected appraisals (Matsueda 1992) and cognitive and emotional identity transformation (Giordano et al. 2007) as the social psychological mechanisms linking age-graded role behavior and desistance. To the extent that those who persist in crime view themselves from the standpoint of a generalized other—the law-abiding adult citizenry—they will have great difficulty understanding themselves as adults.

Following Lemert’s (1951) classic distinction between primary and secondary deviance, Maruna and Farrall (2004) have distinguished between primary and secondary desistance. Whereas primary desistance involves any lull or gap in offending, secondary desistance involves “the movement from the behaviour of non-offending to the assumption of the role or identity of a ‘changed person’” (Maruna, Immerigeon, and LeBel 2004, p. 19). As Meisenhelder (1982) describes the interactive process of desistance, “individuals convince themselves that they have convinced others to view them as conventional members of the community” (p. 138). By voluntarily forgoing delinquent opportunities, desisters also signal to potential spouses and employers that it is safe to build them into their future plans in an orderly and effective manner. The less delinquency and uncertainty in their lives, the more society can make use of young adults (Goffman 1967, p. 174). In contrast, youths who have yet to desist from crime lack the stability and continuity desired for social organization. To be sure, many adults seek excitement or “action” in disciplined or attenuated forms. Organized sports and legal gambling, for example, fall within a socially approved range of respectable adult leisure activities (Berger 1962). Nevertheless, the transition from “hell-raiser to family man” (or family woman) is one of identity change over the life cycle: adults are

expected to settle down to fulfill the roles of spouse, parent, and provider (Hill 1974, p. 190).

The failure to desist also triggers sanctions that increase in severity with age, further impeding the behavioral and subjective transition to adulthood. Such punishment should affect self-conceptions of adult status, independent of the effect of criminal persistence. In his classic study of prison life, Sykes (1958) observed how incarceration reduces prisoners to “the weak, helpless dependent status of childhood” (p. 75). By making age-inappropriateness public, even less intensive sanctions such as arrest, jail stays, and probation impose a stigma that vitiates claims to adult status. As Erikson (1962) has noted, some societies consider deviance to be a natural mode of behavior for the young, with defined ceremonies to mark the transition from delinquent youth to law-abiding adult. In the contemporary United States, there are no such institutional means to remove the stigma of a criminal label and, hence, to clear passage to adult status (Becker 1963; Goffman 1963; Pager 2003). Those who persist in delinquency and those publicly identified as delinquent should therefore be least likely to think of themselves as adults.

HYPOTHESES

On the basis of prior research and an interactionist understanding of the adult transition, we develop six hypotheses to test our conceptual model. Our first hypothesis predicts the same general pattern of association noted by Sampson and Laub (1993), Maruna (2001), Giordano et al. (2002, 2007), Laub and Sampson (2003), and other criminologists: desistance is associated with transitions to full-time employment and marriage, as well as other adult markers, such as having children and achieving financial independence. To test this idea, we undertake a latent class analysis (McCutcheon 1987) of the transition to adulthood, assessing whether the data support a model that places desistance alongside other behavioral markers. This empirically locates patterns of desistance alongside more traditional markers of adult status without imposing any a priori structure as to the patterns of association on the data. The relative support for various model specifications will help show whether desistance is associated with or independent of other adult markers, just as the data reveal whether having a child is associated with or independent of marriage. Given the increasing individualization of the adult transition, we expect at least three classes to emerge. In particular, we expect that having children may be associated with successful socioeconomic transitions for some and problematic transitions for others.

HYPOTHESIS 1: Desistance and other behavioral markers of adult-

hood.—*Desistance from delinquency will be positively associated with other behavioral markers of adulthood, such that a latent class model that includes desistance, family formation, childbearing, school completion, and financial self-sufficiency will be supported by the data.*

Hypothesis 2 examines a mechanism suggested by symbolic interactionist theory, linking social expectations about the age-appropriateness of role behavior to respondents' actual performance in such roles. We anticipate that performing roles associated with conforming activities, such as spending time with one's children, working, or voting, will evoke self-appraisals of adult status. In contrast, because of the widely held societal views of the age-inappropriateness of such behavior, engaging in delinquency will retard feelings of adult status.

HYPOTHESIS 2: Delinquent activities, conforming activities, and the subjective transition to adulthood.—*Given the strong societal consensus around age-appropriate behavior and adult status, individuals will feel less like adults while engaged in delinquent activities and more like adults when engaged in conforming activities.*

Entanglement in the justice system often disrupts the timely and orderly attainment of school, work, and family markers of adulthood. Hypothesis 3 extends the age norms literature (Neugarten et al. 1965) to propose that this disruption similarly affects subjective perceptions of timely attainment. This hypothesis addresses the relationship between justice system contact and domain-specific adult self-appraisals—measured as being on time or off time in the passage of various markers of adulthood. Those arrested will be more likely to report being off time with regard to socioeconomic transitions, family transitions, and other adult role behavior.

HYPOTHESIS 3: Arrest and the timing of adult markers in specific domains.—*People who have been recently arrested will be less likely to appraise themselves as being on time in attaining the behavioral markers of adulthood than people who have not been recently arrested.*

Arrest represents an application of formal social control, publicly labeling behavior as delinquent and, we suggest, age-inappropriate. According to labeling and symbolic interactionist conceptions of punitive justice, such sanctions mark individual rule violators as outsiders, unfit to stand “shoulder to shoulder” with their fellow citizens (Mead 1918; Becker 1963). Given the importance of the appraisals of reference groups, the fourth hypothesis predicts that arrestees will be less likely to appraise themselves as adults.

HYPOTHESIS 4: Arrest and the subjective transition.—*People who have recently been arrested will be less likely to report “feeling like an adult most of the time” than people who have not been recently arrested.*

While desistance is generally conceptualized as an individual-level phenomenon, people also measure their behavior against that of the gener-

alized other (Warr 1998; Maruna 2001). Of course, desistance may imply something quite different for those living in high-crime neighborhoods than for those living in low-crime neighborhoods or in an ideal-typical “society of saints” (Durkheim [1895] 1982). In addition to assessing desistance in terms of absolute levels or thresholds, we therefore also consider desistance relative to friends and others. This hypothesis is rooted in the symbolic interactionist emphasis on reference groups and social comparisons and the criminological emphasis on peers in the etiology of delinquency (e.g., Warr 1998). Hypothesis 5 predicts that those who believe that they are less delinquent than others in their reference group will be more likely to view themselves as adults.

HYPOTHESIS 5: Relative desistance and reference groups.—*People who believe that they now commit less delinquency than others their age will feel more like adults than people who believe that they are committing delinquency as much as or more than others their age.*

Our sixth hypothesis links people’s judgments of their own desistance with their judgments about whether they are adults. This “subjective desistance” hypothesis is perhaps most central to the symbolic interactionist model, rooted in classic work on temporal comparisons, contemporary “narrative” theories of desistance (Maruna 2001), and widely held views on age-appropriate behavior. Individuals who have moderated their delinquent behavior should be more likely to self-appraise as adults than individuals whose delinquency has increased or remained stable. Even if perceptions about desistance are erroneous or inconsistent with measured behavior, our model predicts a strong tie between an internalized self-image as a desister and an internalized self-image as an adult.

HYPOTHESIS 6: Subjective desistance and adult status.—*People who report committing less delinquency than they did five years ago will feel more like adults than people who report committing delinquency as much as or more than they did five years ago.*

DESIGN STRATEGY: DATA AND MEASURES

Evaluating the Hypotheses

To evaluate hypothesis 1, we will test a model of the transition to adulthood that includes desistance among more traditional behavioral markers of adult status. For this portion of the analysis we use latent class techniques (Lazarsfeld and Henry 1968; McCutcheon 1987; Clogg 1995) to ask whether the covariation between desistance and other transition markers is due to their mutual relationship to an unobserved or latent “behavioral adulthood” construct.

The next two hypotheses are premised on the idea that behaviors linked

to roles such as parent and spouse intensify feelings of adult status, whereas behaviors linked to delinquent roles diminish these feelings. To bring some evidence to bear on hypothesis 2, we use self-reported survey data to compare whether respondents feel more or less like adults while they are engaged in various delinquent and conforming activities. To test hypothesis 3, we compare the extent to which arrestees and nonarrestees feel off time in traversing the markers of adulthood. These self-appraisals offer a direct test of key predictions from interactionist theory.

Our final hypotheses specify the effects of three conceptualizations of delinquency and desistance on subjective feelings of adult status. Hypothesis 4 considers arrest, hypothesis 5 assesses “reference group desistance” based on social comparisons, and hypothesis 6 tests “subjective desistance” based on respondents’ temporal comparisons with themselves five years ago. In each case, we estimate the effects of delinquency and desistance on subjective adulthood before and after adjusting for the effects of transition markers such as work and marriage.

Even after statistically controlling for the effects of behavioral transition markers, however, it is possible that the observed effects of desistance on subjective adulthood are spurious as a result of a common or correlated cause. In particular, we are concerned with underlying differences across respondents in unmeasured factors, such as intelligence or ambition, which influence both the decision to desist and adult self-conceptions. Moffitt’s (1993) influential developmental taxonomy, for example, might suggest stability in both delinquency and subjective adulthood among “life course persistent” offenders. We therefore introduce a *lagged* measure of perceived adult status in our final models. By statistically controlling for a prior sense of oneself as an adult, this model provides a variant of the static score or conditional change regression (Finkel 1995, pp. 6–11). The resulting estimates offer a more stringent test of desistance effects on subjective adulthood because they adjust for the influence of stable and unmeasured person-specific differences affecting both desistance and self-appraisals of adult status. Such models also help address concerns about potential social desirability effects and other biases: because we use a lagged measure to capture change in adult perceptions, the effects of stable person-specific response biases should be minimized.

Data and Measures

Our primary data source is the Youth Development Study or YDS (Mortimer 2003), supplemented with the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (see the appendix) and a small sample of interviews with convicted felons, collected as part of a project on criminal sanctions and

civic participation.⁴ The YDS is a longitudinal survey of 1,000 young people who attended St. Paul, Minnesota, public schools in the 1980s. Since 1988, when respondents were high school freshmen, they have reported information about their school, work, and family activities, civic participation, and delinquent involvement. In 2002, when most respondents were 29–30 years old, we added a battery of questions developed to test the preceding hypotheses on desistance, self-appraisals, normative age expectations, and the transition to adulthood.

Descriptive statistics are presented in table 1. Approximately 75% of the sample is white and 43% is male. By 2002, 45% of the respondents were married and 55% had children. The sample size for most analyses presented below is 708. The panel remains generally representative of the St. Paul cohort from which it was drawn, although attrition has been somewhat greater among racial minorities and less advantaged respondents (see Mortimer [2003, pp. 37–43] for details on panel attrition). More specifically, the sample remains substantively similar to that of the first wave of data collection across key indicators, including socioeconomic background, mental health, substance use, and achievement (p. 39).

Our measures of behavioral markers of adulthood include marriage, educational attainment, employment status, and whether respondents have children, all taken in 2002. Given debates around the conceptualization and measurement of desistance (Bottoms et al. 2004; Maruna and Farrall 2004; Massoglia 2006), we assess delinquency and desistance four different ways: behavioral self-reports, official contact with the justice system, behavior relative to peers, and behavior relative to earlier in the life course. We then judge the collective weight of the evidence bearing on our hypotheses rather than basing conclusions on any single measure. To assess behavioral change in self-reported delinquency in our latent class analysis, we examine prior and contemporaneous information on drunken driving, theft, and violence. To test hypotheses 3 and 4, we use self-reported arrest data from 2000–2002, the time intervening between our subjective adulthood measures and self-appraisals. To examine hypotheses about relative and subjective desistance, we crafted items asking respondents to compare their behavior to that of others their age and to the levels they displayed five years ago. These measures were specifically

⁴The 33 interviews were carried out at two state penitentiaries and an urban community corrections office in 1991. Prisoners were recruited by placing an invitation in the daily announcements. Inmates then sent a response (or “kite form”) to a staff contact person for scheduling. Probationers and parolees were recruited by a posted invitation. The interviews lasted from 45 to 90 minutes and were recorded and transcribed. To protect participants’ confidentiality, we use pseudonyms when quoting from the transcripts. All major offense categories were represented among the interviewees, and all had been convicted of serious index offenses (see Manza and Uggen [2006] for details).

TABLE 1
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

Variable	Description	Coding	Mean (%)	SD
Ascribed characteristics:				
Male	Self-reported sex	0 = female, 1 = male	43	.49
White	Self-reported race	0 = other, 1 = white	75	.43
Behavioral adult transitions (2002):				
Children	Presence of children	0 = no, 1 = yes	55	.50
Marriage	Marital status	0 = no, 1 = yes	45	.50
Educational attainment	Postsecondary degree (AA or higher)	0 = no, 1 = yes	39	.48
Self-sufficiency	Respondent and/or partner responsible for all of their living costs	0 = no, 1 = yes	72	.45
Voting	Participation in 2000 election	0 = no, 1 = yes	67	.47
Abstain	No crime (drunk driving, shoplifting, or simple assault) before 1998 or during 1999–2000	0 = no, 1 = yes	20	.40
Desist	Crime prior to 1998 but not during 1999–2000	0 = no, 1 = yes	43	.49
Persist	Crime both prior to 1998 and 1999–2000	0 = no, 1 = yes	36	.48
Deviance (1999–2002):				
Arrest	Arrested in 2000, 2001, or 2002	0 = no, 1 = yes	6	.22
Reference group distance	Compared to <i>others your age</i> , do you do less, more, or about the same amount of partying, breaking work rules, or breaking other rules (such as drunk driving)?	0 = same or more, 1 = less	60	.49
Subjective distance	Compared to <i>five years ago</i> , do you do more, less, or about the same amount of partying, breaking work rules, or breaking other rules?	0 = same or more, 1 = less	75	.43
Subjective adulthood (1999, 2002):				
Subjective adulthood 2002	Do you feel like an adult most of the time?	0 = no, 1 = yes	71	.45

Subjective adulthood 1999	Do you feel like an adult most of the time?	0 = no, 1 = yes	58	.45
Missing dummy	Missing 1999 subjective adulthood	0 = no, 1 = yes	15	.35
Subjective adult transitions (2002):				
“Do you feel early, on time, or late for each of the following events?”		0 = off time; very early or very late; 1 = right on time or slightly early or late		
Parent	Becoming a parent?	0 = off, 1 = on time	64	.48
Married	Get married?	0 = off, 1 = on time	68	.47
Financial independence	Become financially independent?	0 = off, 1 = on time	68	.46
Education	Complete school?	0 = off, 1 = on time	69	.46
Full-time job	Get a full-time job?	0 = off, 1 = on time	75	.43
Start a career	Start a career?	0 = off, 1 = on time	74	.44
Subjective adulthood by domain (2002):				
“People feel more or less like an adult in different situations. . . . Please indicate if you feel like an adult in the following situations?”		0 = not at all or somewhat like an adult; 1 = entirely like an adult		
Voting	When I vote?	0 = no, 1 = yes	91	.27
Volunteering	When doing volunteer work?	0 = no, 1 = yes	75	.43
With children	When I am with my child/children?	0 = no, 1 = yes	69	.46
Limiting drinking	When I limit my drinking because I am driving or a “designated driver”?	0 = no, 1 = yes	86	.34
Working	When I am at work?	0 = no, 1 = yes	80	.41
Something wrong	When I do something I know is wrong?	0 = no, 1 = yes	36	.48
Violating law	When I do something against the law?	0 = no, 1 = yes	23	.42

designed to tap the hypothesized temporal and social comparisons with peers and reference groups.

To test hypothesis 2 about delinquency and subjective adulthood, we use domain-specific questions regarding illicit and conforming behaviors. Respondents reported whether they feel more or less like an adult while hanging out with friends, caring for children, voting, and doing something against the law. Our outcomes for testing hypothesis 3 are self-reported perceptions of the timeliness of reaching behavioral markers of adulthood. We test whether arrest decreases the likelihood that respondents feel on time with respect to parenthood, marriage, financial independence, school completion, and the attainment of a full-time job and career.

Finally, our key outcome for testing hypotheses 4, 5, and 6 is a global measure of subjective adult status, taken in 2002. This item is a self-appraisal of whether respondents “feel like an adult” most of the time, paralleling Arnett’s (1998) “personal conception” indicator and other research on the subjective transition (Shanahan et al. 2005). To test how delinquent and conforming activities alter subjective perceptions, we exploit the longitudinal YDS design, incorporating a lagged subjective adulthood measure in our multivariate models. That is, we estimate the effect of delinquency and desistance from 1999 to 2001 on whether one feels like an adult in 2002 while statistically controlling for earlier subjective feelings of adulthood. For arrest, these models take the form

$$\log \left[\frac{\text{prob}(\text{Adult}_{i2002} = 1)}{\text{prob}(\text{Adult}_{i2002} = 0)} \right] = \alpha + \beta_1 \text{Arrest}_{i2000-2002} + \beta_2 \text{Adult}_{i1999} + \dots + \beta_k X_{i2002}, \quad (1)$$

where i represents individual respondents, Adult indicates the probability of feeling like an adult in 2002 and the lagged measure taken in 1999, Arrest represents an arrest occurring between 2000 and 2002, β signifies the effect of the independent variables, X denotes other explanatory variables, and α represents a constant term.⁵

In sum, the YDS is a rich longitudinal data set that tracks changes in delinquency and the behavioral and subjective transition to adulthood. Because the questionnaire items were tailored to our hypotheses, these data are well suited for testing the proposition that desistance is a separate facet of the adult transition. In addition, we report two supplementary analyses based on a nationally representative survey (Add Health) and a

⁵ Supplemental analysis, available by request, shows consistent results under a dichotomous probit specification and in models treating adult status as a scale ranging from “not at all like an adult” to “feeling like an adult all the time.”

smaller set of semistructured interviews with persons in prison or under community supervision.

RESULTS

To assess our first hypothesis on behavioral markers, we use latent class analysis to model the behavioral transition to adulthood. This latent class analysis has two main functions. The first is to use patterns of covariation among the observed indicators to test whether the data support a model that includes desistance along with other behavioral markers of adult status. The second is to cluster individuals into classes or groups based on their transition patterns. Latent class techniques thus tell us whether the data are consistent with including desistance as a facet of the transition to adulthood, the number of distinctive patterns of transition behavior evident in the data, and the specific probabilities associated with traversing each of the markers in each class. For these models, we measure adult roles using indicator variables for having a child, being married, earning a postsecondary degree, and achieving financial self-sufficiency.

For the latent class analysis, we sought a simple behavioral measure of common delinquency to parallel the marital, employment, and other behavioral indicators in the model. This measure indicates the persistence (or, for a handful of cases, the initial onset) of delinquent involvement, desistance, and stable abstinence based on self-reported violence, property crime, and substance use.⁶ To be classified as a desister for this analysis, respondents must have participated in at least some of these activities prior to 1998 (when they were in their mid-20s) but abstained from at least 1999 to 2000. We specified models with one to five latent classes, finding that the three-class model shown in table 2 best fits the data (McCutcheon 1987; Dayton 1998). All fit statistics support a specification that includes delinquency among other facets of the transition to adulthood, consistent with hypothesis 1.

The model suggests that the behavioral transition to adulthood can be summarized by three patterns, which we identify as *multifaceted*, *socio-economic*, and *problematic* transitions. Approximately 31% of the population from which the sample was drawn make up the multifaceted transition group. They are most likely to have desisted from our delinquency items (probability = .53), to be married (.90), and to have become self-sufficient (.90). They also report a high probability of having children

⁶ Driving while intoxicated (“driv[ing] a car after having too much to drink”), shoplifting (“taking something from a store without paying for it”), and simple assault (“hitting or threatening to hit”).

TABLE 2
 BEHAVIORAL DESISTANCE AND THE LATENT STRUCTURE OF THE TRANSITION TO
 ADULTHOOD

TYPE OF BEHAVIORAL TRANSITION	RESPONSE	CONDITIONAL PROBABILITIES		
		Multifaceted	Socioeconomic	Problematic
Children	No	.281	.989	.267
	Yes	.719	.010	.733
Marriage	No	.101	.884	.876
	Yes	.898	.116	.123
Educational attainment	No	.400	.195	.674
	Yes	.600	.805	.326
Self-sufficient	No	.099	.257	.351
	Yes	.901	.742	.649
Desistance:				
Abstain	Yes	.204	.184	.199
Desist	Yes	.532	.478	.264
Persist	Yes	.264	.337	.537
Latent class probabilities ...		.306	.456	.237

NOTE.— $N = 648$; $\chi^2 = 37$, $df = 27$; index of dissimilarity = .075. Desistance is measured on the basis of three offenses: driving while intoxicated (“driv[ing] a car after having too much to drink” on multiple occasions), shoplifting (“taking something from a store without paying for it”), and simple assault (“hitting or threatening to hit”).

and earning a postsecondary degree. In sum, they appear to have made a multifaceted or complete behavioral transition.

A larger group, constituting 46% of the population, appears to have made successful education and employment transitions while avoiding marriage and childbearing. We identify this pattern as indicating a socioeconomic transition. Members of this group are much more likely to desist (.48) than to persist in delinquency (.34), and they are more likely to have attained a postsecondary degree than those in the other latent classes. In contrast to the multifaceted group, few have married or had children. Nevertheless, their socioeconomic behavior and their desistance over the past three years clearly signal a successful transition to adult roles.

The final latent class, constituting approximately 24% of the population, may indicate a problematic transition. This group shows the lowest levels of degree completion (.33) and financial self-sufficiency (.65), the highest rates of persistence in delinquency (.54), and the lowest probability of desistance (.26). While they also report low rates of marriage (.12), they are approximately as likely as those making multifaceted transitions to be parents (.73). Aside from childbearing, members of this class have yet

to transition into roles associated with adult status. In keeping with hypothesis 1, they are unlikely to have desisted from delinquency.⁷

If models that include desistance among the other markers had provided a poor fit to the data, it would have provided evidence against our first hypothesis that desistance is a facet of the transition to adulthood. Instead, however, we find that including desistance from common delinquency among other adult markers is consistent with these data. Those who fail to move away from delinquency are far and away the least likely to have made other adult transitions. Moreover, because rates of abstinence are similar across the three classes (.18–.20), this pattern is unlikely to be accounted for by stable differences between abstainers who never participated in delinquency and others who had some history of delinquent behavior. Having modeled how desistance covaries with other behavioral markers, we now consider how delinquent and conforming activities influence perceptions of adult status.

Figure 2 shows the relationship between participation in delinquency and feeling like an adult in different domains. Consistent with hypothesis 2, behaviors associated with performing adult roles as parents, workers, volunteers, and law-abiding citizens—the latter measured by limiting drinking and serving as a designated driver—are much more strongly associated with adult status than illegal or even unethical behaviors. For example, a clear majority of respondents feel like adults when voting, working, and spending time with children, but only 39% feel like adults when violating the law and 36% when doing things they know are wrong. This pattern supports the interactionist view that behaviors supporting parent or worker roles intensify feelings of adult status, whereas behaviors linked to roles such as law violator diminish such feelings. To the extent that the YDS sample represents a cross section of U.S. society, figure 2 also helps establish the views of the generalized other and potential reference groups with regard to the age-appropriateness of delinquency and conformity.

Hypothesis 3 returns to behavioral indicators of adult status and delinquency, in this case self-reported arrest. Figure 3 shows the percentage of respondents who believe they are on time in attaining each marker, comparing those who had been arrested in the past three years with nonarrestees. As hypothesized, the recently arrested are significantly less likely to believe that they are making timely progress in five of the six domains: marriage, schooling, employment, financial independence, and the start of a career. Having children is the only marker in which we

⁷ Latent class models were also estimated separately for men and women. The results (available by request) are substantively similar to the full sample results presented in table 2.

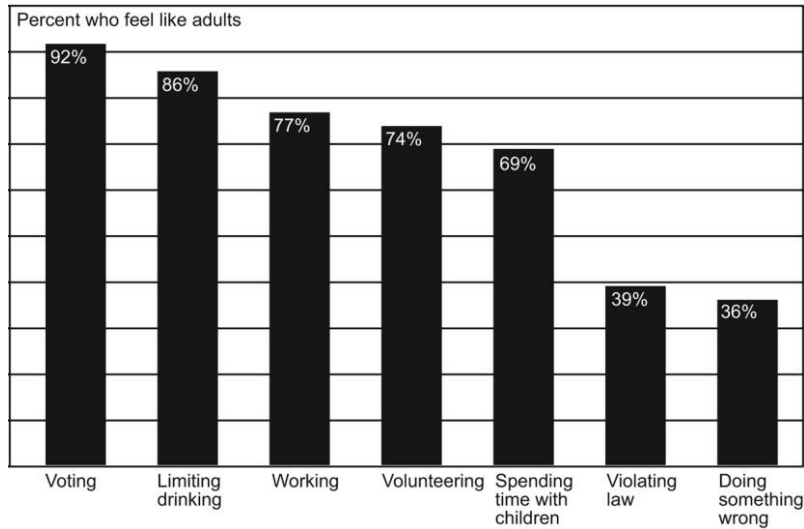


FIG. 2.—Feelings of adulthood when engaged in each behavior. Percentages reflect those who report participation in each behavior (e.g., the time with children indicator reflects only those with children). The comparable percentages for the full sample are 81% for voting, 67% for limiting drinking, 72% for working, 46% for volunteering, 39% for spending time with children, 31% for doing something wrong, and 23% for violating the law.

failed to detect a significant difference. Strikingly, only 44% of recent arrestees feel on time with regard to completing their educations, relative to 70% of the nonarrestees.⁸

While the preceding analysis provides evidence linking delinquency to widely shared conceptions of adulthood, it does not explicitly tap respondents' subjective sense of adult status. We next examine how delinquency is linked to a global self-appraisal of adult status. Each set of models incorporates demographic factors, behavioral markers, and lagged mirror measures of adult status taken prior to measures of delinquency and desistance. This lagged variable helps adjust for the effects of enduring differences across persons in stable characteristics such as impulsiveness or criminal propensity over the life course. We consider the effects of arrest in table 3 and the effects of reference group desistance and subjective desistance in table 4.

Estimates from logistic regressions of subjective adulthood on arrest are shown in table 3. Model 1 reveals a strong bivariate association, with

⁸ We also estimated multivariate logistic regression models to adjust the estimated effects of arrest on feeling on time in each domain for race and gender (not shown; available by request). The results echo the bivariate comparison above, although the financial independence model is no longer statistically significant ($P = .13$).

Settling Down and Aging Out

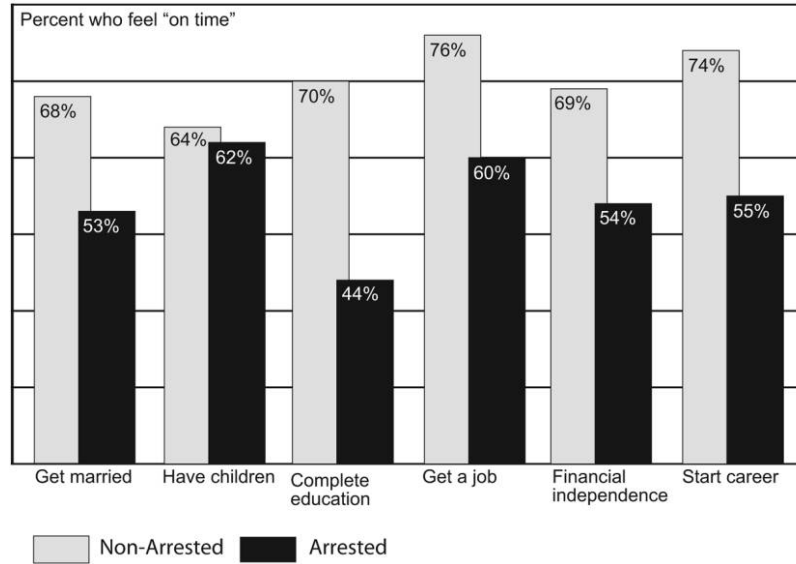


FIG. 3.—Percentage reporting feeling on time by arrest status. Respondents were asked to report whether they felt they were on time for each behavioral marker. Response categories ranged from very early to on time to very late. Each outcome is coded 1 for on time and 0 for early or late in the attainment of these markers. * $P < .05$.

arrestees being about 74% less likely to report feeling like an adult ($e^{-1.362} = .26$). Model 2 shows the basic relationships between background indicators, behavioral markers such as marriage and employment, and subjective adult status. We find no significant racial differences but sizable gender differences in subjective adulthood. On average, married respondents are more likely to feel like adults and those with higher levels of educational attainment are less likely to feel like adults.⁹ Model 3 folds in other adult markers, attaining financial self-sufficiency and having children, using items mirroring those in the latent class analysis. Having children and attaining self-sufficiency, both positively associated with subjective adult status, reduce the effects of marriage and education to non-significance in model 3. Next, model 4 incorporates voting, an adult role behavior seldom considered in life course research, as well as the lagged

⁹ Further investigation revealed that those with postsecondary degrees are more likely to aspire to further schooling, which may account for the negative effect of education on the subjective adulthood measure.

TABLE 3
ARREST AND SUBJECTIVE ADULT STATUS: LOGISTIC REGRESSION ESTIMATES

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Arrest (1 = arrest in 2000–2002)	-1.362*** (.337)				-1.528*** (.404)
Male		-.574*** (.169)	-.473** (.173)	-.420* (.194)	-.291 (.199)
White		-.080 (.197)	.079 (.205)	.031 (.232)	.026 (.237)
Marriage .....		.468** (.173)	.079 (.193)	.089 (.213)	.016 (.216)
Educational attainment		-.364* (.173)	-.156 (.183)	-.134 (.211)	-.209 (.215)
Self-sufficiency .....			.405* (.192)	.436* (.216)	.424* (.219)
Children .....			.866*** (.197)	.748*** (.219)	.867*** (.224)
Voting .....				.464* (.217)	.494** (.221)
Prior adult status (1999)				2.222*** (.219)	2.205*** (.221)
Missing dummy for prior adult status .....				.071 (.271)	.162 (.277)
Intercept .....	.999*** (.087)	.715** (.306)	-.296 (.326)	-1.075** (.400)	-.971* (.502)
-2 log likelihood	831.94	825.93	802.82	677.14	662.47

NOTE.—*N* = 708. Numbers in parentheses are SEs.
* *P* < .05.
** *P* < .01.
*** *P* < .001.

measure of adult status. Both voting and, not surprisingly, prior subjective adult status are strong positive predictors of subjective adulthood.¹⁰

Finally, model 5 of table 3 incorporates each of the behavioral markers and a measure of arrest in the three years intervening between the subjective adulthood measures. Consistent with hypothesis 4, arrest reduces the probability of feeling like an adult by approximately 78% ($e^{-1.528} = .22$). Including arrest in the model reduces the effect of gender to non-significance, suggesting that young men's greater likelihood of arrest partially explains why they are less likely to feel like adults than young women. With the exception of the lagged measure of adult status, the arrest coefficient is as large as any other predictor in the final model. The results in table 3 thus provide strong evidence that arrest retards subjec-

¹⁰ Including the lagged dependent adult status measure reduces the sample size by approximately 100 cases. We therefore imputed values for prior subjective adulthood for these cases and add a missing values indicator variable (Little and Rubin 1987), which does not approach standard significance levels. The results shown are consistent with those obtained using listwise deletion on the smaller sample and those based on alternative imputation methods. The results were also substantively similar when using a self-reported delinquency scale rather than arrest and in ordinary least squares regression models that treat adult status as a five-point continuum.

Settling Down and Aging Out

TABLE 4
REFERENCE GROUP DESISTANCE, SUBJECTIVE DESISTANCE, AND SUBJECTIVE ADULT
STATUS: LOGISTIC REGRESSION ESTIMATES

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Reference group desistance . . . .	.472** (.168)	.245 (.200)			.096 (.215)
Subjective desistance . . . . .			.626*** (.183)	.557** (.221)	.518** (.235)
Arrest (1 = arrest in 2000– 2002)		–1.491*** (.406)		–1.552*** (.406)	–1.537*** (.408)
Male		–.304 (.199)		–.236 (.202)	–.238 (.202)
White . . . . .		.035 (.237)		.015 (.238)	.023 (.239)
Marriage		–.013 (.219)		–.040 (.218)	.049 (.220)
Educational attainment		–.187 (.215)		–.207 (.216)	–.201 (.216)
Self-sufficiency . . . . .		.407* (.218)		.402* (.219)	.405* (.219)
Children . . . . .		.860*** (.225)		.823*** (.225)	.817*** (.226)
Voting . . . . .		.521** (.221)		.451* (.222)	.452* (.223)
Prior adult status (1999)		2.171*** (.220)		2.223*** (.224)	2.226*** (.224)
Missing dummy for prior adult status . . . . .		.157 (.278)		.091 (.281)	.084 (.280)
Intercept . . . . .	.630*** (.125)	–1.082** (.415)	.457*** (.154)	–1.247*** (.426)	–1.268*** (.426)
–2 log likelihood	841.72	663.78	837.04	656.12	655.47

NOTE.—*N* = 708. Numbers in parentheses are SEs. Reference group desistance: Do you do less (a) partying, (b) stealing from work, (c) other acts (such as driving after having too much to drink) than friends your age? Subjective desistance: Do you do less (a) partying, (b) stealing from work, (c) other acts (such as driving after having too much to drink) than you did five years ago?

* *P* < .05.
** *P* < .01.
*** *P* < .001.

tive adulthood, even net of behavioral transition markers, background factors, and prior feelings of adult status.

Having established a link between arrest and subjective adulthood, table 4 considers the two conceptions of desistance suggested by our symbolic interactionist model and narrative accounts of desistance (Maruna 2001), as specified in hypotheses 5 and 6. Reference group desistance refers to committing less delinquency than one’s peers of the same age, and subjective desistance refers to committing less delinquency than one had committed five years previously. Model 1 shows a significant correlation between reference group desistance and subjective adult status. Those who report doing less delinquency than others their age are about 60% more likely to report feeling like adults than those who report doing at least as much delinquency as their cohorts ($e^{.472} = 1.60$). In model 2, however, this relationship is rendered nonsignificant with the inclusion of a

lagged indicator of adult status, voting, and other markers. As in table 3, the negative effect of arrest remains statistically significant and large in magnitude.

In table 4, model 3, we introduce our final delinquency indicator, subjective desistance. This measure taps whether respondents report committing less delinquency than they did five years ago. Model 3 shows that those who believe that they are desisting are almost twice as likely to see themselves as adults as others ($e^{.626} = 1.87$). In contrast to reference group desistance, subjective desistance remains statistically significant when a lagged subjective indicator and the behavioral markers are introduced in model 4. Those reporting subjective desistance are significantly more likely to feel like adults, whereas those who are arrested are significantly less likely to feel like adults. As in the preceding models, attaining financial independence, voting, and having children are all linked to subjective adulthood. Finally, model 5 of table 4 includes all three delinquency measures. Although some precision may be lost because of collinearity across our multiple measures of delinquency and desistance, the results are again consistent with the preceding analyses. Arrest and subjective desistance predict subjective adulthood, with effects approximating or exceeding those of established markers such as marriage and employment.

To test the robustness of these findings, we undertook a supplementary analysis using the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health) in the appendix. In all cases, the Add Health results support the findings above. We emphasize the YDS analysis, however, because repeated subjective adulthood measures are needed for our lagged dependent variable approach to modeling individual change and because the subjective and reference group desistance items are available only in the YDS. The Add Health analysis nevertheless helps confirm that the patterns observed in our Minnesota data may be generalized to a representative national sample. The appendix shows that both serious and minor forms of delinquency are associated with diminished subjective adulthood in Add Health. Given the age structure of Add Health, we also tested for age effects in the relationship between offending and adult status. As the sample ages, delinquency becomes increasingly inconsistent with feelings of adult status, in keeping with our interactionist model and the YDS results (not shown; available from authors).¹¹

¹¹ Our primary concern is to establish a link between delinquency and subjective adulthood in the general population, but we also undertook an examination of a subsample of more serious offenders using Add Health data. The results of these analyses strongly support the patterns shown in tables 2 and 3 and appendix table A1. When we restrict the full models shown in the appendix to the most delinquent 25% of the sample, the relationship between delinquency and adult status remains statistically significant for all four offending measures. Moreover, there is considerable

INTERVIEW DATA

While the relationships observed in both the YDS and Add Health surveys are consistent with an interactionist account, no survey can speak to the hypothesized mechanisms implied by this framework. To elaborate these results among those with more intensive involvement in the adult criminal justice system, we draw on the semistructured interviews with Minnesota felons described in note 4. Consistent with our conceptual model and the preceding analysis, interview participants clearly recognize the appraisals of others and the stigma associated with age-inappropriate delinquent behavior. Moreover, many linked movement away from crime to the process of becoming an adult, both behaviorally and subjectively. Their accounts are largely consistent with the interactionist model and our quantitative findings. For example, Michael, an African-American probationer in his 20s, is acutely sensitive to the appraisals of others in recounting how a new robbery charge jeopardizes his standing as an adult in his neighborhood:

[I] caught a brand new case like three days ago, for narcotics. Now I've got to go to trial with that. . . . For real. I'm about 25 now, and I need a decent family, decent job, car, going to work every day. I want to be there [in my neighborhood] so people would know, "Hey, man, [Mike's] doing something, going to work every day, family going to church. He was out there wild, look at him now, he's changed."

For Michael, part of becoming an adult is "doing something" to attain the behavioral markers of adulthood, such as "going to work every day." Also embedded in Michael's idea of adulthood, however, is moderating his "wild" earlier behavior, desisting from delinquency, and having a "decent" family (see, e.g., Anderson 1999). Michael's account is consistent with our survey results on moving away from delinquency—and forward with other life plans—during the passage to adulthood. Scott, another probationer in his mid-20s, also pointed to his neighbors in distinguishing a "progression" toward adulthood from the simple passage of time:

You see the same alcoholic that you grew up with, or you seen drinking on the corner or you seen drinking around, or the same guy that used to be the best thief, that could steal anything, he's still doing it . . . the same girls, they've grown older, and they're doing the same things, you know? Then you got some people that . . . had the proper upbringing and the

evidence that the effect of deviance on adult identity becomes stronger among more serious offenders. When the analysis is restricted to the most delinquent 8% of the sample, the magnitude of the coefficient for general delinquency is approximately 25% greater, and the coefficients for theft (65%) and breaking and entering (57%) were also substantially larger (not shown; available from the authors).

father and . . . you see them progress, or you hear about their progression, you know in the time that you were gone. This is just things that I noticed when I was locked up and this is the things that I seen. That's why I believe that things just don't change just because time goes by.

Scott's account echoes those of recent narrative models of desistance (Maruna 2001; Farrall 2002) and Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck's classic distinction between maturation and "chronological age" (Glueck and Glueck 1945, p. 81). Returning from prison, he saw both desistance and persistence among the "guys and girls" in his neighborhood. Scott judges his adult passage against the actions and assessment of these peers—what we term reference group desistance—and against earlier points in his life—what we term subjective desistance. More generally, Scott's comments underscore the centrality of desistance in understanding progress toward adult status.

Other interview participants made more explicit temporal comparisons, referring to themselves as children or juveniles in recalling times of active offending. Thomas, a parolee in his 20s, noted he "was a kid back then," but prison and "the fast life" grew incompatible with desired adult family roles:

You can't be a father when you're in jail. . . . I never had a father, [he] was out doing God knows what. And I don't want my children to have to go through that, so knowing that, as you grow, the older you get, the wiser you become. The more right. You know what I'm saying? 'Cause you can party 'til your head fall off, but you know it ain't all about that. I wanted to live the fast life, but it ain't all about that anymore.

Such accounts are not limited to males. Pamela, a woman in her 40s imprisoned on drug charges, similarly viewed fellow inmates as "kids" or children: "That's how the women are here, just beaten up. Beaten up little kids who grew up. They're like little kids walking around in woman bodies."

While Thomas and Pamela associated offending with childhood and adolescence, others elaborated on how the status of delinquent cuts against other adult roles. Karen, a prisoner in her 30s, ticked off examples of successful adult role behavior, while noting that her passage was blocked by her felon status: "I am so much more than a felon, I am educated, I'm hard working, I'm a good mother, I am dependable, all of those things." Dylan, who served over a decade in prison for a crime committed while a teenager, lamented his slow progress toward adult markers: "I have so much to make up for, like lost time, and I have nothing to show for it. I'll get out when I'm 34. I have no house, no car, no anything."

Dylan clearly understood and internalized the widely held cultural ex-

pectations surrounding a successful adult transition. He was thus keenly aware how his years in the justice system stunted his passage to adulthood, in both a material and a subjective sense.

Taken together, the interviews and the more systematic analysis of YDS and Add Health survey data present a consistent picture. Across multiple indicators of desistance and contact with the justice system, movement away from delinquency emerges as an important part of the passage to adulthood. In the YDS analysis, the magnitude of the association between desistance and adult status is consistently exceeded only by having a child, placing desistance among the strongest predictors of subjective adulthood. These findings are similarly rendered in felons' accounts of their own passage. People measure their progress toward adult status against their earlier behavior and the expectations and behaviors of key reference groups. Those who do not move away from delinquency do not typically make a smooth adult transition, either subjectively or behaviorally. Such evidence supports conceptualizing desistance as a separate and important component of the multifaceted transition to adulthood.

TOWARD AN INTERACTIONIST THEORY OF DESISTANCE AND ADULTHOOD

Over four decades ago, classic life course studies identified strong societal consensus in the age norms governing social behavior (Neugarten et al. 1965). By this time, theory and research in the sociology of deviance had begun to link crime and punishment to conceptions of adulthood (Sykes 1958; Erikson 1962; Becker 1963). As correctional populations swell, scholars are increasingly blending these research traditions to consider crime and punishment as a stratifying mechanism and important life event (Laub and Sampson 2003; Western 2006; Wakefield and Uggen 2010). Our kernel notion here is that movement away from delinquency is a distinct dimension of the transition to adulthood. With the unique and perhaps expected exception of parenthood, those who fail to desist generally fail to attain the markers of adulthood in a timely fashion and are not accorded adult status by others. Internalizing these appraisals, they come to see themselves as less than adults.

Some have suggested that the expansion of the penal state has reduced the number of "marriageable" male partners in some—predominantly African-American—communities (Wilson and Neckerman 1986; Staples 1987; but see Lopoo and Western 2005), but "doing time" impedes the timely transition to adulthood in a more general sense. Aside from involvement with the correctional system itself, a strong social expectation of desistance accompanies aging, such that cultural expectations about

leaving crime parallel expectations about attaining markers such as marriage and self-sufficiency. People connect desistance with adulthood because they have internalized ideas about the age-appropriateness of delinquent conduct and its inconsistency with a sense of oneself as an adult. Continued criminal justice involvement and the failure to settle down or desist from delinquent behaviors further diminish these subjective feelings of adulthood.

We first tested a model of the adult transition that includes desistance from delinquency alongside work and family transition markers. Consistent with the predictions of developmental psychologists from G. Stanley Hall (1904) to Jeffrey Arnett (2000), the latent class analysis reported in table 2 shows how desistance is tightly bound up with other adult markers. We then asked whether people feel more like adults while engaged in conforming activities and less like adults while engaged in delinquency. Consistent with our interviews and symbolic interactionist theories of role behavior (Mead 1934; Wells and Stryker 1988), figure 2 shows that prosocial acts such as voting evoke feelings of adulthood, whereas law violation inhibits such feelings. Figure 3 offered support for our hypotheses about formal sanctions (Erikson 1962; Becker 1963; Matsueda 1992; Maruna et al. 2004), as arrest diminishes perceptions that one is making timely progress toward adult family, school, and work transitions. We then considered the effects of delinquency and desistance on a global indicator of subjective adulthood. Consistent with labeling variants of symbolic interactionism, being arrested sharply diminishes the probability of feeling like an adult in our tables 3 and 4. Moreover, as predicted by interactionist models of role transitions (Heimer and Matsueda 1994), subjective desistance increases the likelihood that individuals come to view themselves as adults.

The overall consistency and magnitude of the effects suggest that desistance is a strongly predictive, and likely a constitutive, element of adulthood. In the final model of table 4, those who subjectively desist are approximately 68% more likely to report feeling like adults than those who persist. Net of subjective desistance, formal justice system contact further bars passage to adulthood, since arrested individuals are about 79% less likely to report feeling like an adult than those who are not arrested. With the exception of having children and our lagged subjective adulthood indicator, these effects are stronger than all other variables in the model.

Settling down or transitioning from “hell-raiser to family man” or woman (Hill 1974) is thus closely tied to both the behavioral transition to adulthood and a subjective sense of attaining adult status. Considered in life course perspective, this study complements work positing that adolescents engage in delinquency to attain adult status (Greenberg 1977;

Moffitt 1993) and work linking minor deviance with precocious adult transitions among younger teens (Staff and Kreager 2008). When the current research is contrasted with studies on children and adolescents, it reveals an important irony regarding the relationship between delinquency and adult status: while delinquency may look like adult behavior to the teen or “tween,” we have shown that it consistently diminishes feelings of adult status for those in their late 20s and beyond.

The current study also helps refine research on identity shifts and desistance from crime (Maruna 2001; Giordano et al. 2002). Investigations based on interview data, case studies, and small-scale surveys are detailing a dynamic “secondary desistance” process, distinguishing simple gaps in offending from more fundamental identity shifts (Maruna, Immarigeon, and LeBel 2004, p. 19; see also Giordano et al. 2007, p. 1613). The present analysis leverages longitudinal data from a representative community survey to explicitly model one such transformation—the development of an identity as a full-fledged adult. By examining repeated measures of subjective adulthood across multiple conceptions of delinquency and desistance, we find general support for the transformation processes described in other work.

It is perhaps noteworthy that the extension of adolescence has coincided with large-scale incarceration practices that increase the visibility and penetration of the justice system in everyday life. Our findings thus accord with work on the extended adolescent period and recent documentation of a more halting and individualized progression toward adulthood in modern America (Shanahan 2000; Furstenberg et al. 2004), as well as research identifying incarceration as a common life event, particularly among less educated African-American men (Dickson 1993; Bonczar 2003; Pettit and Western 2004; Wakefield and Uggen 2010). Whereas prior work establishes the direct effect of punishment on adult status markers (Staples 1987; Pager 2003; Lopoo and Western 2005; Western 2006), however, we find that it also erodes individuals’ sense of themselves as adults. We might speculate that erosion of adult status will, in turn, further delay progression into adult roles in the workplace, the family, and the community.

CONCLUSION

Just as Neugarten et al. (1965) identified cultural norms regarding the ages of events such as marriage and childbirth, we point to parallel cultural expectations governing cessation from delinquency. Although delinquency is generally considered normative in adolescence, it becomes age-inappropriate by the late 20s, when adult roles of parent, employee, and

partner support development of a generalized adult identity. Moreover, the failure to desist produces appraisals and assessments at odds with adulthood. Accordingly, those who persist are less likely to see themselves as adults or to be perceived by others as adults, marking desistance as a facet of the adult transition in the contemporary United States.

Across multiple data sources, we find a tight linkage between desistance from delinquency and adult status, whether measured by behavioral markers or by respondents' own sense of themselves as adults. While these results are largely consistent with interactionist accounts of desistance and the adult transition (Heimer and Matsueda 1994; Giordano et al. 2007), more work is needed to specify the relationship between delinquency and subjective understandings of what it means to be an adult. Two lines of inquiry are particularly important.

First, further work is needed to understand how historical context and cohort-specific experiences shape the relationship between illicit behavior and identity. A historical or cohort analysis might illuminate when, where, and for whom desistance matters most in shaping conceptions of adult status. In this regard, a more focused analysis of the role of peer and reference groups in the adult transition would be particularly fruitful, as would work on samples more diverse than those of the YDS and Add Health. Second, beyond more diverse samples, additional work is needed on the transition to adulthood for especially vulnerable populations, including those in foster care, those with mental or physical health problems, and those in the justice system (Osgood et al. 2005; Arnett 2007). Given the results presented here, it is likely that members of such groups may also have difficulty traversing the subjective transition and understanding themselves as adult citizens. Along similar lines, research on the life course consequences of punishment might specify how such punishment disrupts the transition to adulthood and, in turn, affects well-being and social functioning.

While much work remains, the core findings of this paper are important for understanding delinquency and identity in the transition to adulthood. Growing out of delinquency appears to be a key element of the subjective and behavioral transition to adulthood, consistent with our symbolic interactionist account of desistance and the adult transition. Our results support the contention that people internalize widely shared norms about delinquency and age-appropriateness. Continued involvement in the delinquent activities of adolescence is largely inconsistent with adult roles and incompatible with a global perception of oneself as an adult. Settling down or desisting from delinquency is thus an important component in the bundle of role behaviors that define adulthood in the contemporary United States.

APPENDIX

Supplemental Analysis of National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health

This appendix supplements and replicates the findings presented in tables 3 and 4 with the National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health (Add Health). Add Health is a nationally representative study of adolescents and young adults. Starting in 1994, data at the individual, family, school, and community levels were collected over multiple waves. In the 2001–2 survey, respondents were asked about the impact of adolescent experiences on young adulthood. Of particular relevance to this article is a question on subjective adulthood that closely matches our YDS indicator. We therefore conduct a supplementary investigation to test the robustness of our YDS results on the national Add Health sample.

The results in table A1 are clearly consistent with our YDS analysis. Even after we account for the effects of other life course markers, delinquency is significantly associated with diminished feelings of adult status. This relationship holds for petty delinquency, serious delinquency, and a summary scale. Moreover, when models are restricted to the most delinquent 25% of the sample, the relationship remains statistically significant for all four measures. We repeated this process among progressively more delinquent subsamples, finding stronger effects among more serious offenders. For example, when the analysis is restricted to the most delinquent 8% of the sample, the magnitude of the general delinquency coefficient is approximately 25% greater whereas the coefficients for theft (65%) and breaking and entering (57%) are also substantially larger (not shown; available from the authors).

As with the YDS analysis, delinquency is among the strongest predictors in these models predicting subjective adult status. The consistency of the relationship between crime and subjective adulthood is striking in light of differences in the analytic sample and collection protocol of the Add Health and YDS data. Such results provide further evidence linking distance from delinquency to conceptions of adulthood in the contemporary United States.

TABLE A1
 LOGISTIC REGRESSION ESTIMATES PREDICTING SUBJECTIVE ADULT STATUS: NATIONAL
 LONGITUDINAL STUDY OF ADOLESCENT HEALTH (Add Health)

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Male	-.292** (.04)	-.303** (.04)	-.275** (.04)	-.307** (.04)
Race (black = 1) .....	.353** (.05)	.353** (.05)	.341** (.05)	.353** (.05)
Age .....	.058** (.01)	.062** (.01)	.059** (.01)	.063** (.01)
Educational attainment .....	.286** (.05)	.278** (.05)	.274** (.05)	.277** (.05)
Voting .....	.089* (.04)	.091* (.04)	.092* (.04)	.092* (.04)
Married .....	.366** (.07)	.382** (.07)	.371** (.07)	.386** (.07)
Children (living at home) .....	.013 (.05)	.019 (.05)	.017 (.05)	.016 (.05)
Household ownership .....	.302** (.05)	.295** (.05)	.306** (.05)	.301** (.04)
Employment .....	.259** (.04)	.263** (.05)	.259** (.05)	.263** (.04)
Wave 3 delinquency scale	-.092** (.02)			
Petty (theft of less than \$50)		-.394** (.11)		
Petty (property damage)			-.374** (.07)	
Serious (breaking and entering)				-.322* (.14)

NOTE.—*N* = 11,580. Numbers in parentheses are SEs. Delinquency scale includes a range of both serious (e.g., assault, gun violence) and minor (e.g., theft) indicators. The dependent variable is “Do you feel like an adult most of the time?”

* *P* < .05.

** *P* < .01.

*** *P* < .001.

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