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## Examining the Needs of Emerging Adults Involved in the Justice System

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Youth, the time of life between childhood and adult maturity, is often equated with adolescence. However, our notions of maturity are evolving as social conditions change as well as our understanding of brain development and associated cognitive capabilities. Jeffrey Arnett (2000) has identified a new developmental stage between adolescence and adulthood, emerging adulthood, ages 18-25. This stage of life is of particular relevance to youth involved with the justice system because this age group tends to have worse outcomes than younger and older people, yet the justice system has not typically focused attention on them.

In this newsletter we examine general information about this age group and take a look at those involved in Missouri's justice system. We compare the status of this age group to younger juveniles and to older drug court participants as well as drug offenders in the Department of Corrections. We are expanding the age range to include 17 year olds because they straddle the youth and adult court systems and system-involved youth of this age tend to have the same characteristics as comparable 18-25 year olds (not in school, little parental control, heavily influenced by peers).

Age Groups as Proportion of Total Missouri

Total population	0-16 Birth-adolescents	17-25 Emerging Adults
5,878,415	22.8%	12.4%
26-35 Young adults	36-64 Middle adults	65+ Older adults
13%	38.4%	13.4%

Popul  
ation

Source: U.S. Census 2007

In Missouri, over 12 percent of the population is in the emerging adult group.

### Research on Emerging Adulthood

Emerging adulthood is "a period of prolonged exploration before settling into stable adult roles and responsibilities." (Roisman, et al. 2004). This stage of life is characterized by instability and stress, the absence of social controls, a tendency to associate with peers who engage in similar behaviors and experimentation with life style choices. Setterson, et al. (2005) found that the majority of youth who successfully transition into adulthood continued to receive substantial assistance from family or other support systems well into their twenties or even their thirties. Lacking adequate social support, this period of exploration and instability can place those in the justice system at particular risk for not following a positive pathway to maturity.

Just as adolescence became recognized as a discrete life stage because of social

conditions at the turn of the last century, emerging adulthood is an outgrowth of the current social environment, namely delayed family formation and continued economic dependence. A key marker of adulthood is marriage and family formation. Many young adults consider marriage and parenthood as perils to avoid in their early twenties (Arnett 2005). In Missouri, marriage tends to occur at the end of this life stage, for young women at age 24 and for young men, about age 26 (Hughes 2008).

Many young people extend their educational achievements into their twenties. Among 20-21 year olds, over 57 percent have had some college (Lopez & Elrod 2006). Thus, another key indicator of adulthood, financial independence, is delayed as individuals pursue education rather than employment. Economic conditions also make it more difficult for young people to become independent. Finding a job is difficult and finding one that pays a living wage is even more difficult. Recent statistics from the U.S. Census show that among this age group, 55 percent of men and 46 percent of women were living with their parents (Christian Science Monitor 2004).

Finally, science has also played a part in the identification of this new life stage. We now know that the brain typically matures around age 25. One's cognitive capacities and brain maturity impact the ability to function as an adult. A mature brain can apply knowledge and experience to objectively solve problems.

### **Status in the Justice System**

Juveniles with high rates of delinquency are five times more likely to be arrested in emerging adulthood and seven times more likely to be arrested later in life (Moffitt et al. 2002). In 2008 the Missouri Legislature considered HB1550 which proposed expanding the age of juvenile jurisdiction to include 17 year olds. The juvenile courts may not have the resources to effectively work with older youth offenders who are currently processed in the adult system.

Missouri has a statewide risk and needs assessment tool that juvenile courts use to identify the level of supervision and programs most appropriate for an individual. Some of the indicators are presented below as they relate to emerging adults.

Drug court programs provide court mandated treatment services for individuals who have substance abuse problems. Younger participants tend to have higher rates of recidivism (Roman, Townsend & Bhati 2003) and shorter time periods to rearrest (Peters, Haas, & Murrin 1999). This is also a time of high need for treatment services. This age group has the highest prevalence rates for most types of drug use (Arnett 2005). Missouri drug court statistics reflect these national findings. In three years of adult drug court exits, 42 percent of 17-25 year olds graduated compared to 61 percent of those 26 and older. This difference is of particular concern because almost half of all drug court participants, 46 percent, were in the 17-25 age group. Using information collected when participants begin the program, we compare the status of the older and younger groups.

Researchers and professionals have long recognized that younger offenders have shorter time spans to rearrest (Hepburn & Albonetti 1999). Among individuals under the supervision of the Missouri Department of Corrections in 2004, those in the 17-25 year old group had the highest risk scores for recidivism and in fact, up to 75 percent of them returned to prison within three years. This analysis examines the status of offenders who were sentenced to a 120 day shock treatment program in a correctional facility.

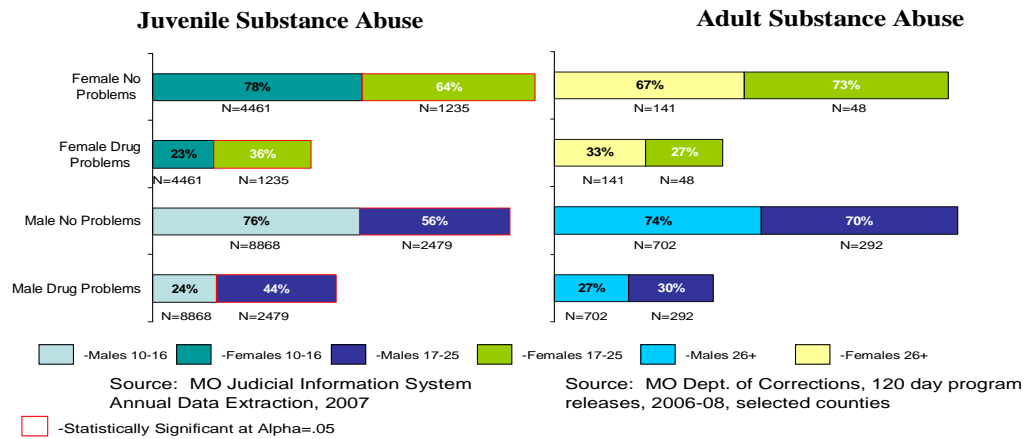
### **Examining Patterns of Risks and Needs Across Age Groups**

In Missouri, certain individuals in juvenile court as well as all individuals under correctional supervision undergo an assessment of their risk for recidivism and their psychosocial needs. In drug court, individuals are assessed on how well the

program impacts individual and family well-

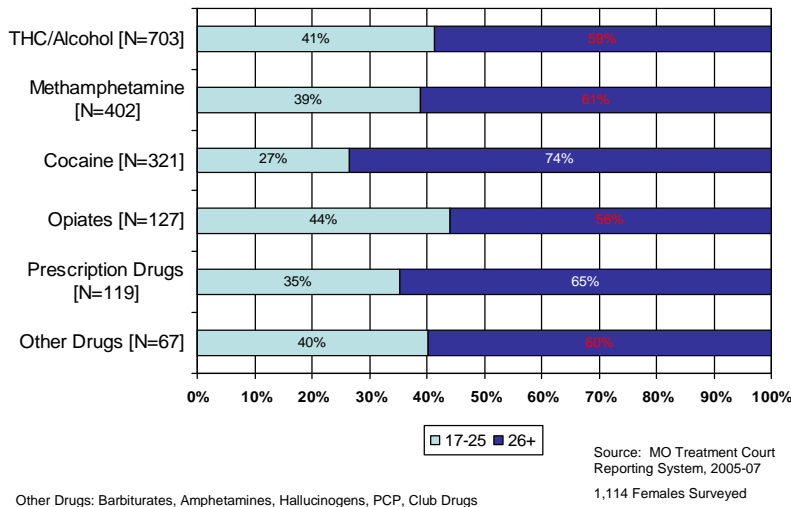
being. Details about these assessments can

be found in references at the end of this publication. While the three sets of assessments vary in information collected, we have pulled together some common indicators to compare differences between the 17-25 year group and younger and older individuals across systems. We examine a significant risk behavior, substance abuse. We also compare potential protective factors: educational attainment, employment status, and social relationships.



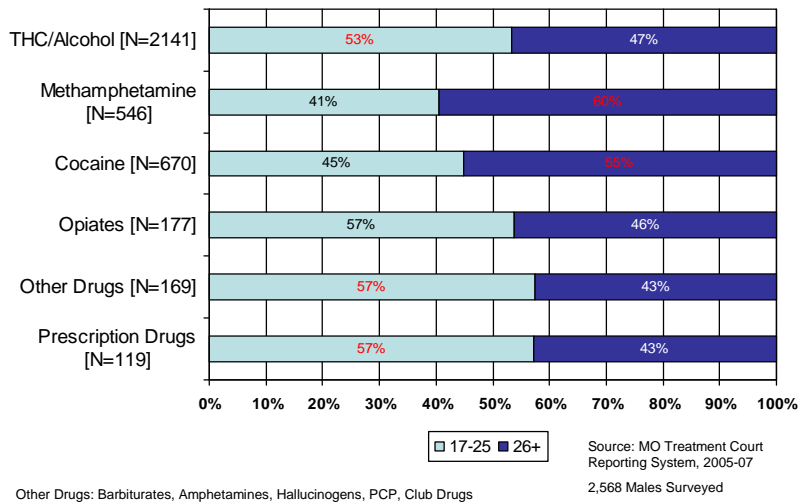
Substance abuse is a significant issue throughout the justice system. A significantly larger proportion of emerging adult females have substance abuse problems compared to their younger counterparts. For males, the same pattern exists in the juvenile system, a significantly larger proportion have substance abuse problems. Within the adult offender group, no significant differences appear between the two age demographics.

**Substance Abuse: Female Drug Court Participants**



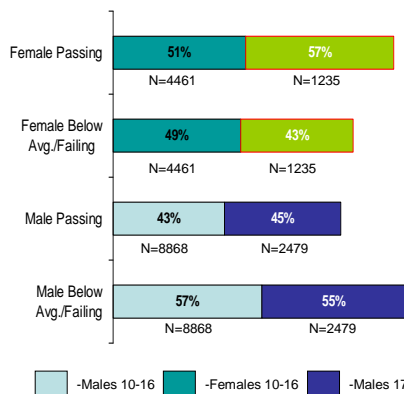
Marijuana and alcohol are often called gateway drugs. Emerging adults may use them experimentally, as a coping mechanism, or in an addictive manner. Among female adult drug court participants, the percentages of emerging adults using most types of drugs are significantly lower than that of the older adult demographic. However, for marijuana (THC)/alcohol and opiates, no significant difference exists between the two age groups.

### Substance Abuse: Male Drug Court Participants

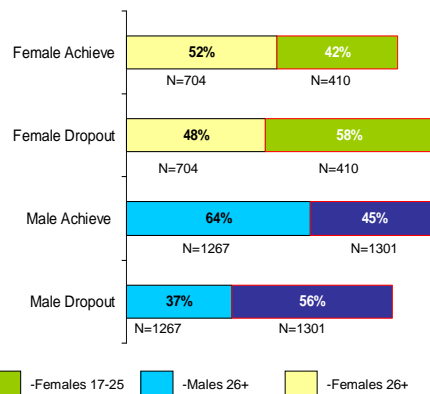


For male drug court participants, emerging adults are using marijuana (THC)/alcohol, other drugs (i.e. barbiturates, amphetamines, hallucinogens, PCP, club drugs), and prescription drugs at significantly higher rates than their older counterparts. Opiates could also be an area of concern since our data suggest that more emerging adults are using opiates than the older adults; though just not at a statistically significant rate.

### Juvenile Educational Achievement



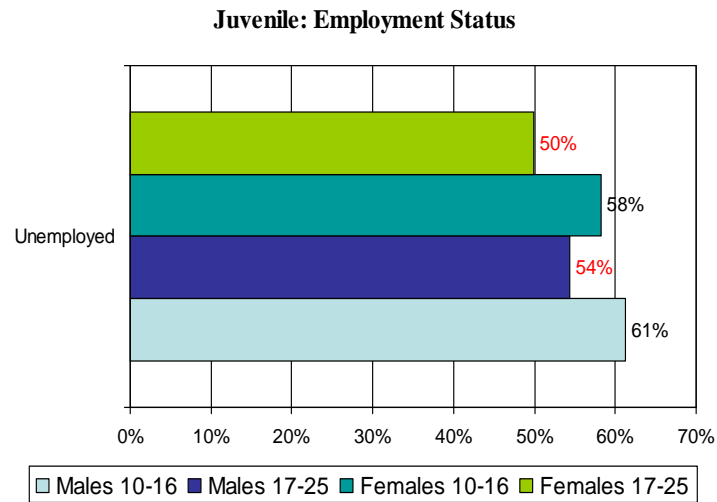
### Adult Educational Achievement



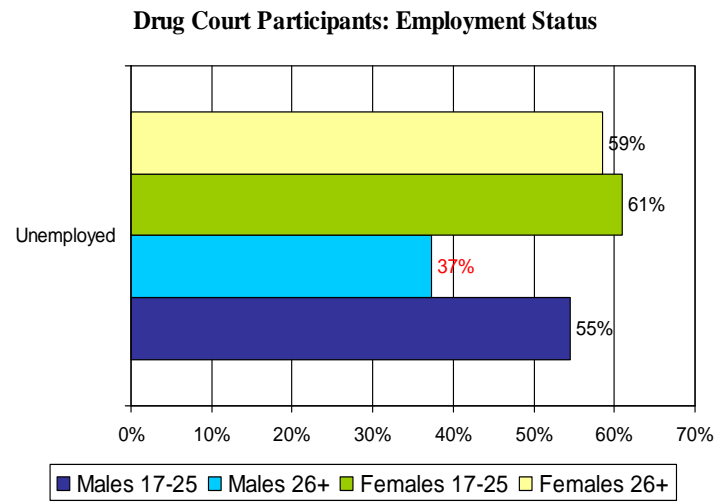
□ -Statistically Significant at Alpha=.05

Among youth in the juvenile system, a greater proportion of the emerging adults (of those in school) have passing grades. However, in comparing emerging adults by gender, males are not doing as well in school as females. Taking a look at the drug court participants, a significantly higher proportion of both male and female emerging adults have dropped out of school compared to older participants who are more likely to complete high school.

Among juveniles who should be employed because they are out of school or otherwise have time available, a higher proportion of the emerging adult group is unemployed.



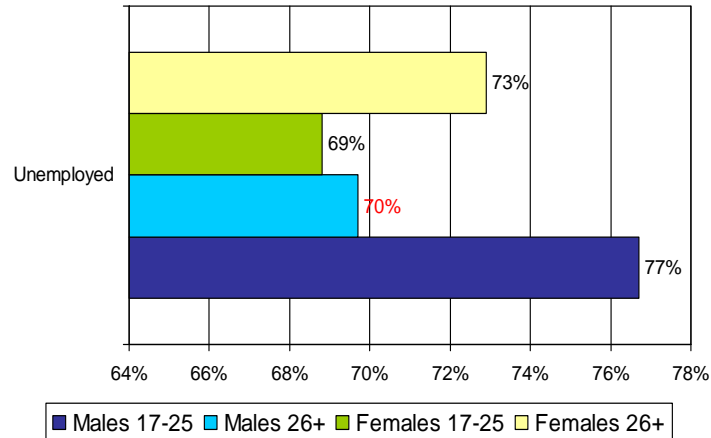
Source: MO Judicial Information System Annual Data Extraction, 2007



Source: MO Treatment Court Reporting System, 2005-07

Among drug court participants, a higher proportion of the emerging adults are unemployed. Females and younger males are more likely to be unemployed.

### Department of Corrections : Employment Status



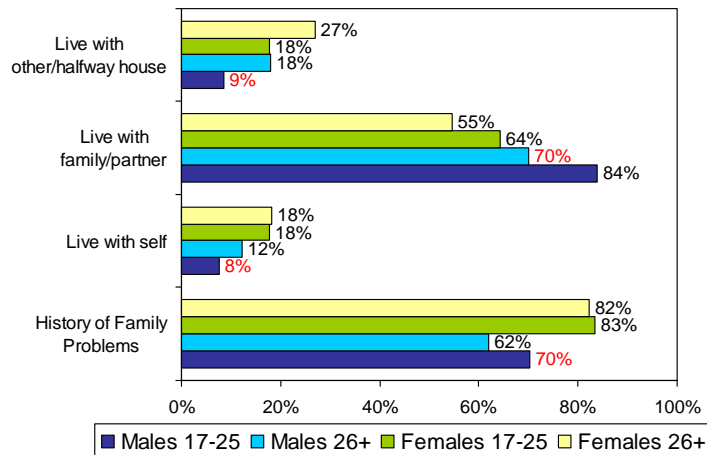
Source: MO Dept. of Corrections, 120 day program releases, 2006-08, selected counties

For individuals released from 120 day programs, emerging adult females are less likely to be unemployed and males are more likely to be unemployed compared to older offenders.

### Nature of Relationships with Family and Friends

Family support and guidance has a complex relationship with development into adulthood. Positive support can positively impact emerging adults and research shows that many individuals in this age group depend on such support from family. Too much dependence on family at this time of life may indicate an individual is not equipped to function independently. At the same time, depending too much on a family that is not functioning well can impede development.

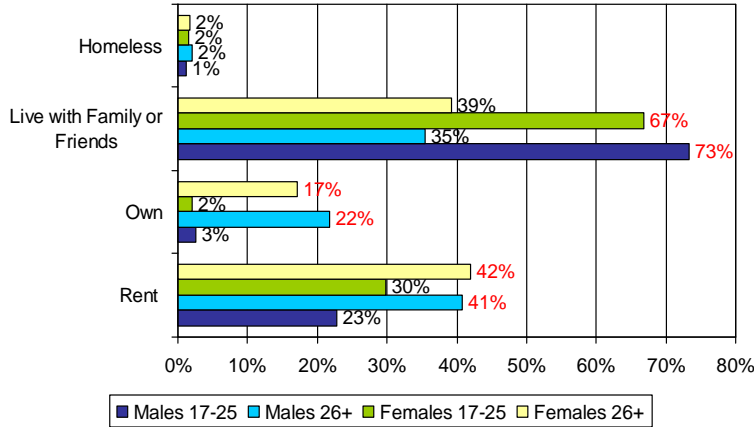
### Department of Corrections: Living Arrangements/Family Profile



Source: MO Dept. of Corrections, 120 day program releases, 2006-08, selected counties

Within the Department of Corrections offender group, significantly larger percentages of emerging adults, both females and males, live with their extended families and/or immediate families. As for family problems, only males appear to significantly differ. The proportion of emerging adult males with a history of family problems (arrest, domestic violence, provide no positive support to individual) is significantly higher than that of their older counterparts.

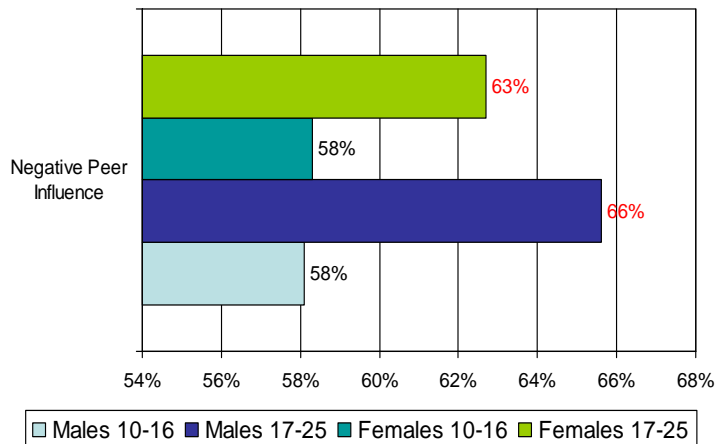
### Drug Court Participants: Living Arrangements



Source: MO Treatment Court Reporting System, 2005-07

Among drug court participants, no differences exist in who is homeless. The emerging adult group is much more likely to live with family or friends. Older individuals tend to live in a home they own or rent. This is an age group that is beginning to draw away from their family of origin and typically have not yet formed a family of their own. One marker of family formation is the parenting role. Among the juveniles, a higher proportion of the emerging adult group, nine percent of the females and five percent of the males, have at least one child. Among the drug court participant group, smaller proportions of the emerging adult group have children but more of the females in this group were pregnant (11%) when they began drug court.

### Juvenile: Peer Relationships



Source: MO Judicial Information System Annual Data Extraction, 2007

Within the juvenile system, significantly larger proportions of emerging adult males and females were negatively influenced by their peers.

### Discussion

Using the available data this analysis shows that emerging adults differ from their counterparts in their substance abuse behavior, educational achievement,

employment status, and the nature of relationships with family and friends. However, this information provides an incomplete look at this age group in the context of their characteristics and developmental tasks.

What you would want to know:

- If using drugs and alcohol, is the behavior addictive or indicative of a lifestyle or experimentation?

- What are the current substance use patterns relative to past patterns? (more or less consumption?)
- Even if not in a career track job, does the individual have experience in the formal labor market?
- What sort of adult responsibilities does the individual have? Parenting role? Financial responsibility? Other dependents?
- Is the individual financially independent or on a pathway toward independence?
- Does the individual have interactions with social controls that can challenge inappropriate behavior?
- Does the individual have some sense of future direction?
- Does the individual take responsibility for his/her behavior, including law-breaking behavior?
- Can the individual make and implement decisions?
- Does the individual have a sense of self-efficacy?
- Are intimate relationships fostering a higher sense of commitment than at younger ages?

While emerging adulthood represents a time of great challenges for those in the justice system, it also offers opportunities. Many youth experience turning points at this stage of life that lead them away from a life of crime (Laub, Nagin, & Sampson 1998). The justice system has the opportunity to intervene at this life stage to create turning points. A first step is to better identify the particular risks and needs of this group and create interventions to better address these risks and needs.

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