

Teens who believe they'll die young turn to crime, study says

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When Jordan Henderson was 18 he was arrested for drug distribution. He has turned his life around and now sees a positive future. "I always thought it would be much better to be dead than in jail," he said in his Richardson, Texas, neighborhood on May 9, 2014. Nathan Hunsinger/Dallas Morning News/MCT

DALLAS — Growing up in a rough North Dallas neighborhood, Jordan Henderson envisioned just two options for his future – jail or the graveyard.

"I always thought it would be much better to be dead than in jail," Henderson said.

With little to look forward to, the 18-year-old began to get involved in drugs and other criminal activity. He prayed that he'd live to see 21.

Henderson's choices shouldn't come as a surprise, according to a recent University of Texas at Dallas study. Researchers found that teens who believe they will die young are more likely to commit crimes — and more serious ones at that.

Question Of Age

The study, released last month, asked more than 1,300 serious juvenile offenders in Arizona and Pennsylvania one question: How long do you think you'll live? Their answers ranged from 16 to 200 years old. Researchers then checked in periodically with them over seven years and asked them whether they had committed new crimes.

The youths who went on to commit the most crime were the ones with a short-term mentality, who didn't think they'd live very long. Notably, there was also a group of juvenile criminals — those who could imagine they had a future — who successfully reformed.

“What that tells us is you can't just say all of these serious offenders are all bad and they're all going to be bad forever,” UTD criminologist Alex Piquero said.

Piquero, who led the study, said letting kids know “that your life now is not destiny” can make a difference.

“That's the take-home policy message from this. It's not a bleak thing,” he said. “We can turn some of these kids around if we give them these opportunities and we give them these consistent messages.”

For a long time, Henderson felt he had neither. All the adults he knew had no college education, and many dealt drugs to make money, he said. Earlier this year, Henderson was arrested for distribution of marijuana.

“I basically had no visible hope,” he said. “I thought to myself, this is the lifestyle that everybody before me shows, this is the lifestyle that everyone around me is doing and this is the lifestyle I have to choose.”

He added, “I was involved in that lifestyle not by choice, but because I felt I was condemned to that lifestyle.”

Worried About Today

That's a mentality that 15-year-old Merl Lovings of DeSoto, Texas, can relate to. His father is serving a 15-year prison sentence on a charge of aggravated robbery with a deadly weapon, and he said he has a cousin his age who is in jail.

Last year, he said he stole a BB gun and intended to sell it.

“For the short term, man I was just like, if I do this I can get my brother some shoes and I can probably get an outfit or something,” said Lovings. “But long term, I wasn't really thinking about it.”

Lovings believes he'll live to be about 50 or 60, but right now, he worries a lot about how to provide for his 6-year-old brother and 5-year-old sister. He recently began selling candy at school and around his apartment building to contribute to the family's income.

He spends less time focusing on his own future, and has vague ideas of joining the Navy or pursuing a rap career.

Piquero said that's a typical mindset for many juvenile offenders. "They have to basically survive today, and they can't even think about 30 years from now," he said.

Piquero said he hopes the government will do more to give disadvantaged teens the opportunity to be productive citizens, and put a bigger emphasis on education and jobs.

But he said parents and teachers can also have a huge impact by consistently telling teens that success is possible and encouraging them to develop long-term goals.

"Hope And Encouragement"

Chad Houser has seen how the opportunity to do an honest day's work, combined with a simple pat on the back, can make all the difference.

Houser is executive director of Dallas-based Cafe Momentum, a nonprofit restaurant that provides internships to young men coming out of jail. Since the program started in 2011, he said many of the ex-offenders he works with go to school without textbooks and worry about their next meal. They live in neighborhoods overrun with trash, and with guns around every corner.

In their world, an early death isn't just a possibility it's a reality they accept. Houser said he's never heard a teen talk about living beyond age 20.

But he watches their attitudes transform with the chance to prepare food and serve guests at top-notch restaurants.

For the first time in their lives, many feel a sense of approval and the joy that comes in living up to expectations. They begin to have something to live for — and work toward — instead of accepting their dismal circumstances as fate.

"It works in every case," Houser said. "When you give them hope and encouragement and literally, as silly as it sounds, a pat on the back, a 'good job,' it changes their entire disposition."

As for Henderson, his arrest turned out to be a decisive moment for his future. He enrolled in school and now has a full scholarship to Fisk University in Tennessee.

Henderson now hopes he can live into his 90s to see his children and grandchildren have real opportunities.

"I pray that I live to see the generational curse I'm so accustomed to be broken," he said. "To be that difference maker, to be that one person who decided to make a change ... that, to me, would be the hope I never got."