

School Retention Linked to Violent Crimes in Adulthood in New Study

By Sasha Jones on [January 2, 2019 3:06 PM](#)



By Guest Blogger Sasha Jones

Test-based retention in 8th grade increases the likelihood of criminal conviction by age 25, according to a new study.

The study focused on Louisiana students who were held back in 8th grade between 1998-1999 through 2000-2001 because they just scored just below the cutoff on tests designed to determine whether they were ready for promotion to 9th grade. Their outcomes were compared with those for similarly low-performing students in the same state who were promoted to 9th grade during the same time period. By doing so, the authors of the study hope to eliminate external socioeconomic factors that could lead to similar effects.

The findings were shared December 2018 in a working paper posted by the National Bureau of Economic Research.

"The only difference between the kids right below the threshold and the kids above is that the kid below scored one point below the kids right above," Michael Lovenheim, co-author and associate professor of Cornell University's department of policy analysis and management, said.

If a student is retained in 8th grade, the likelihood of being convicted for a violent crime by the age of 25 increases by 1.05 percentage points—a 58.44 percent increase relative to the mean for this group of students. Nevertheless, there is little effect on juvenile crime, and a non-statistically significant increase in the likelihood of being convicted of any crime.

Almost all the convictions for a violent crime are for assault or robbery, with very few murder convictions in the sample.

The study suggests that retention leads to a decline in high school peer quality and educational attainment. This may result in weaker noncognitive skills, such as self-control, and worsen a student's job prospects, which ultimately could lead to violent criminal behavior in adulthood.

Nonviolent crimes, such as property and drug crimes, may not see similar results since the perpetrators do not tend to exhibit the same lack of self-control, according to Lovenheim.

Louisiana's school choice policy contributes to such declines because students who are retained may subsequently attend high schools associated with worse academic outcomes, according to the authors.

The study also found that retention increases the number of days students are absent three years later by 1.97 percentage points and the number of disciplinary incidents by 1.1 percentage points; and retained students are 7.17 percentage points more likely than their nonretained peers to drop out of high school.

Although several factors may affect Louisiana's results, including its retention and school choice policy, Lovenheim said that all school districts with similar policies should consider the potential implications. Currently, 16 states and many school districts incorporate similar end-of-the-year promotional exams.

"We have to think strongly about whether the benefits of these policies outweigh the costs," Lovenheim said. "If you enact a grade-retention policy in 8th grade, like Louisiana has, and don't do anything else to support the kids who are retained, then these are the effects that you [may experience]."

The study claims that violent crimes have had a social cost of between \$2.6 million and \$18.4 million statewide, based on the additional number of crimes committed per the cohorts of 8th graders examined.