

# HOW CHILDHOOD TRAUMA ADVERSELY AFFECTS DECISION-MAKING

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Punishment—or the threat of it—is generally considered an effective way to shape human behavior; it is, after all, the foundation of our criminal justice system. But what if there's a subset of the population for whom this paradigm simply doesn't apply? [New research](#) suggests that there is such a group: survivors of childhood trauma.

University of Wisconsin–Madison psychology professor Seth Pollak worked with over 50 people around the age of 20, and found that those who had experienced extreme stress as kids were hampered in their ability to make good decisions as adults. Simply put, childhood trauma—due to circumstances like neglect or exposure to violence—created young adults fundamentally unable to correctly consider risk and make healthy life decisions—and no threat of punishment was likely to be effective in changing this deficit. For cities where [fears of juvenile violence](#) have transfixed residents and flummoxed city leaders, Pollak's results suggest that demands for stiffer sentences on youthful offenders are likely to be counterproductive.