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Youth and Prison Culture

In 1994 I walked into the system a teen and spent the next several decades being raised by the system. For the next decade the men I shared my space with and the guards that watched over me would become the systems version of foster parents. While my immaturity was written on my face and in my behavior in the systems eyes I was an adult because I met the definition of an “adult” based on a hard line drawn based on my age. It would take another 20 years before the science behind adolescent brain development began to question our understanding of why and youth offender crime like mine occurred. In hindsight the writing was on the wall but no one could see it then.

At the time of my arrest the science on adolescent brain development for youth 16-21 years old was in its infancy. Before I was sentenced Dr. Joel Alexander, a psychologist for the Western Oregon State College, who specialized in psychology and neuropsychology was hired to examine me. At the time of the exam he was doing a research on what he called “extreme group designs”.¹ He described his research as looking at “[a]ny group that you can identify in the population that is extreme in nature”.² He said these extreme groups “help, shall we say, delineate the normal population.”³ The two groups that Dr. Alexander identified as being of the most interest to him were “homosexuals” and “people charged with murder”.⁴ Because I fell into the latter category he was hired to examine me and render an opinion on if my neurological activity fell into the “normal population”.

¹ *State of Oregon v. Jacob Barrett*, Case No. 9402002CR, Sentencing Hearing held September 28, 1995. Testimony of Joel Amille Alexander (hereafter Alexander Testimony).

² Alexander Testimony, Id.

³ Alexander Testimony, Id.

⁴ Alexander Testimony, Id.