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International Perspectives and Lessons Learned on Desistance

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Executive Summary

Since the mid-1990s, there has been a sustained research effort in many countries to further knowledge about why people stop offending. This white paper focuses on international interventions that have been initiated to foster desistance.

The paper first discusses how desistance has been defined and operationalized, and reviews the main associates and correlates of desistance. It then critiques many criminal justice systems' desistance-promoting elements and presents the lessons learned from various countries that have pursued such policies. Finally, it discusses some of the interventions that appear likely to support and promote desistance.

The key processes associated with desistance appear to be related to:

- Marriage or partnership (including parenthood).
- Employment (or another legitimate role in society, such as learning or homemaking).
- Leaving the area where a person grew up or offended in the past.
- Aging (especially after age 25).
- Accommodation that is secure, safe, and away from others who may encourage offending.
- Finding a reason to stop offending.
- Making the decision to stop — and having this decision supported by wider institutions and individuals.
- Deciding “who” one wants to become in the future.
- Aspects of the criminal justice system that assist desistance (others find that these stigmatize and hinder desistance).
- Religious conversion (in some cases).

The paper examines the very few studies that explore variations in these processes by ethnicity as well as studies that are cross-national. Based on this review, the paper argues that criminal justice systems may need to adapt their current approaches so they more readily embrace the idea that people who want to desist:

- Have strengths that can be harnessed, while admitting that there are weaknesses that need to be avoided. This implies a change to assessment procedures.
- Need to be treated individually (at least some of the time) and given opportunities (rather than threats or punishments) to which they will want to respond positively.
- Should be engaged and employed as co-producers of their own (and others') desistance. This implies a greater use of former service users in peer mentoring schemes and as program designers.
- Will face setbacks and relapses during their journeys away from crime. Realism rather than idealism is the watchword here.

- Will find informal, rather than formal, interventions most valuable and meaningful.
- Do better when they are kept out of prison or sent to prison only briefly (whenever possible).
- Will be more likely to remain out of trouble when criminal justice system workers support them in the wider social and community contexts in which they live. This means partnering with religious institutions, employers, community groups, local sports groups, and other organizations based in the community.
- Will do better when the criminal justice system supports their relationships (where appropriate).
- Should be encouraged to practice newly formed social identities (such as parent, partner, and employee) in supported contexts.
- Should have good progress recognized and, if possible, certified.
- Can be supported in careers (either formal employment careers or those developed away from the economy, such as school governor, homemaker, and volunteer) by selective access to their previous criminal histories.

The paper provides suggestions for how colleagues working in the United States might develop these ideals into workable policies and practices.

International Perspectives and Lessons Learned on Desistance

Introduction

In the years since monographs such as *Crime in the Making* (Sampson & Laub, 1993) have been published, there has been a tremendous research effort to further knowledge about why people stop offending. Although much of this research has been based in countries with well-established criminological communities (such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and a few other European countries), empirical studies have also been conducted in Brazil, Chile, France, Germany, Ireland, Israel, Spain, and Sweden, among others. Although the theoretical understanding of desistance from crime has advanced considerably — as acknowledged by the National Institute of Justice’s call for white papers in this area — a critical gap remains in our collective understanding about how this knowledge should be applied. Such knowledge is crucial because if key decision-makers are able to operationalize these insights into research-informed innovations, then future practice in crime prevention, sentencing, and the wider criminal justice system may be further improved.

This white paper explores how insights from desistance research have been used in the United Kingdom and, to a lesser extent, further afield. The paper begins with a discussion of how desistance is defined and operationalized, followed by a review of the main associates and correlates of desistance. The paper then critiques many criminal justice systems’ desistance-promoting elements, drawing on insights from England and Wales, Scotland, France, and Israel, as well as some experiences in North America. It finds that much of what criminal justice systems “do” is not conducive to supporting desistance. The final section — the main focus of the paper — discusses ideas for activities and procedures that are more likely to support and promote desistance. These ideas are drawn both from empirical studies and from the “philosophy” of many criminal justice systems and the ways in which it shapes desistance-related work.

Defining and Operationalizing Desistance

To desist is to cease from doing something. Thus, desistance from crime is the (assumed) permanent cessation of offending following a period of sustained offending. Laub and Sampson (2003, p. 21) provided an insight into the definitional and operational problems with this concept, writing, “Although it is difficult to ascertain when the process of desistance actually begins, it is apparent that it continues after the termination of offending. That is, the process of desistance maintains the continued state of non-offending.”

Farrall and colleagues (2014, p. 27), on the other hand, operationalized desistance in their study as meaning “anything from a recent commitment to avoid further trouble (supported by evidence of attempts at behavioural modification) to several years of non-offending behaviour.” Desistance, they added, is an “imprecise, fluctuating, and a mix of intentions and actions (or, perhaps more accurately, inactions).” Thus, definitions of desistance vary from study to study.

Desistance is a slippery concept, even by social science standards. Intending to inject more precision into definitional matters, Maruna and Farrall (2004, p. 174) introduced the concepts of “primary” and “secondary desistance.” Primary desistance is desistance “at its most basic and literal level” and refers to “any lull or crime-free gap in the course of a criminal career.” Drawing heavily upon Lemert (1951, p. 76), they argued that secondary desistance marks “the

movement from the behavior of non-offending to the assumption of a role or identity of a non-offender or ‘changed person.’” In secondary desistance, crime not only stops, but “existing roles become disrupted” and a “reorganization based upon a new role or roles will occur.” Indeed, recent research (Giordano, Cernkovich, & Rudolph, 2002; Maruna, 2001; Shover, 1996; Farrall, 2005) provides compelling evidence that long-term desistance involves identifiable and measurable changes at the level of personal identity, or “the ‘me’ of the individual” (Lemert, 1951, p. 76; Maruna & Farrall, 2004, p. 174).

As a partner to these concepts, McNeill (2016) introduced the term “tertiary desistance” to refer to another phase in desisting from crime, namely the recognition by others (such as family members) that the individual has now ceased offending. This brings with it an increased sense of belonging for the person who desisted. Some have also referred to “supported desistance” or “assisted desistance” (Nugent & Schinkel, 2016) to refer to desistance that takes place or is initiated with help from a formal third party (such as a drug counselor or probation officer).

Why Do People Stop Offending?

Initially, age was seen as one of the key factors associated with desistance (Glueck & Glueck, 1937, p. 105). Although age remains a strong predictor, more recent research has pointed to additional processes.

In the 1980s, when research on desistance was still in its infancy, some adopted a rational choice perspective and argued that desistance was the result of decision-making (Cusson & Pinsonneault, 1986, represents a good example of this approach). More recent thinking holds that while decisions are important, they are unlikely to be sufficient on their own.

Highly regarded research argues that the relationship between the person who is desisting and wider society is crucial. Sampson and Laub (1993) argued that the bond between an individual and others in society is the cornerstone of desistance. Furthermore, they argued, both formal and informal social institutions “cement” the bond between the individual and society. These institutions include schools, families, and peer groups in early adolescence and employment, marriage, and parenthood in adulthood.

Maruna (2001, p. 7) pointed to another set of processes, arguing that “to desist from crime, ex-offenders need to develop a coherent, pro-social identity for themselves.” Individuals must find ways of “making sense” of their past lives to “redeem” and find value in lives that had often been spent offending.

Hence the key processes associated with desistance from crime appear to be related to:

- Marriage or partnership (including parenthood).
- Employment (or another legitimate role in society, such as learning or homemaking).
- Leaving the area where a person grew up or offended in the past.
- Aging (especially after age 25).
- Accommodation that is secure, safe, and away from others who may encourage offending.
- Finding a reason to stop offending.
- Making a decision to stop — and having this decision supported by wider institutions and individuals.
- Deciding “who” one wants to become in the future.
- Aspects of the criminal justice system that may assist desistance (others find that these stigmatize and hinder desistance).
- Religious conversion (in some cases).

Some research has examined variations in these processes by ethnicity (Calverley, 2013) and gender (Rodermond et al., 2016). Although most of these processes remain, some become more important for certain groups. For example, religious beliefs play a stronger role in desistance for some religions than others (Calverley, 2013). However, there have been too few studies on variance to conclude how gender, ethnicity, age, and other factors (such as the nature of the offending career or the country in which the individual lives) interact to shape processes of desistance from crime.

Some cross-national studies suggest variations in processes of desistance that appear to be consistent with national-level social, economic, and cultural variations (Segev, 2020; Österman, 2018; Farrall, 2019). For example, when comparing processes of desistance for women in Sweden and England, Österman (2018) found that the Swedish welfare system enabled women in that country to desist from crime more speedily and easily than the English women. Alternatively, Segev (2020) found climatic and cultural factors when comparing processes associated with desistance in Israel and England. Persons desisting in Israel spent more time out of their homes and were better able to build bridging social capital than their English counterparts, which helped in their search for meaningful work.

Recent studies (F.-Dufour & Brassard, 2014; Farrall et al., 2014) have reported that different groups may have different routes out of crime. F.-Dufour and Brassard (2014), for example, found that those who started offending at a younger age tended to come from more disadvantaged backgrounds and, contrary to Sampson and Laub's (1993) thinking, rejected conventional ties and informal social control. Those who started later in life (in their 30s) and came from more privileged backgrounds tended to favor psychosocial interventions.

Critiques of Existing Provisions and Policies

A methodological divide exists in studies of desistance. Some researchers have examined why people in community samples start and then stop offending (e.g., Farrington, 1992). Others have recruited samples from within the criminal justice system. Farrall, for example, studied desistance and persistence among a group of men and women starting probation supervision in England. He found that the factors that assisted desistance — such as families and employment — were not the factors on which probation officers worked with their caseloads (Farrall, 2002, p. 220). Staff focused on thinking skills or exploring why the individual had started offending, rather than on what would help him or her desist. Farrall (2002, p. 220) concluded that probation was (at that point) “offending-related” and not desistance-focused.

Other cases have found that criminal justice systems tend to view people who have been convicted of crimes as the embodiment of risks that need to be tackled and dealt with. This is seen as the consequence of risk assessment tools, which inadvertently encourage probation staff to view those on probation as people who only have risks, rather than people who may have strengths that can be harnessed (a point discussed later).

Criminal justice systems' recent reliance on longer and more punitive sentences — especially if they involve imprisonment or formal debarring from, for example, voting — can provide additional hurdles to those wishing to desist. In a fast-moving economy in which new technologies have a rapid turnover, skills are easily lost while individuals are in prison and not working (or working, but not using electronic devices as part of their work). Insurance systems may also inadvertently encourage employers to recruit from outside of this population to achieve lower rates of insurance premiums. Reductions in the type of employment that might suit those embroiled in the criminal justice system — who may (typically) be males from lower socioeconomic groups and have lower educational qualifications and poor IT skills — have not helped some sections of the pool of people who want to desist from transitioning away from offending.

As Shover (1996, p. 179) observed, “In many [U.S.] states, as matters stand today, the heaviest penalties fall at the point when many offenders are on the verge of desisting or shifting to less serious forms of crime. Heavy prison sentences can exact such a toll from offenders that they miss all timetables for achieving success legitimately.” As such, the empirical studies on desistance from crime point not simply to a set of correlates and associates of desistance, but to a wider set of values and system philosophies that can hinder desistance from crime at a systemic level.

Proposals for Future Interventions and System Philosophies

The remainder of this paper focuses on proposals, policies, and practices that have been made or adopted to improve an individual's chances of desisting from crime. Where possible, an assessment of their impacts is noted. The paper discusses both specific intervention programs and the philosophies of criminal justice systems.

Key social institutions like family and employment are important, and common ideas — such as the concept of “forgiveness” and individual change — have become culturally embedded. Further, many aspects of the criminal justice systems in the United States and the countries discussed below are similar (such as the existence of both prisons and community sentences). Therefore, colleagues in the United States could relatively easily adopt these proposals, policies, and practices, either in part or in whole.

Philosophies and General Principles

In addition to studies and publications on specific interventions that embed desistance ideals into practice, there is a series of publications that has articulated visions and principles that the criminal justice system should try to embody. Some researchers (e.g., Farrall, 2002) have argued that the criminal justice system should move away from thinking of its work as being offending-related toward being desistance-focused because one of the ultimate aims of supervision — as a sentence or part of another sentence, such as parole — is to stop future crimes from being committed. Farrall argued that systems should assess what people require in their lives to ensure that they stop offending and then attempt to produce these features in such a way that people actually *do* stop offending. This approach has a number of similarities to strengths-based perspectives (Ward & Maruna, 2007).

Strengths-based approaches offer an alternative to needs-based or deficits models, which inadvertently view those being supervised or worked with as having deficits in their social or personal lives that need to be remedied or controlled (Maruna & LeBel, 2003). The broad family of strengths-based approaches focuses on the strengths that individuals possess, rather than on their deficiencies. Strengths may simply be things that are not risks — such as a strong bond with an elderly, law-abiding relative — or things that might positively assist them — such as a strong bond with law-abiding family who might be able to offer, for example, routes into employment or secure accommodation. The central aim is for individuals to “earn their way back into society” in a full, participatory manner — rather than simply being supervised and controlled in such a manner that offending on their part is impossible. One of the key aims, therefore, is to allow individuals to demonstrate their “true” inner character, rather than being characterized as a “bad” person (Maruna, Porter, & Carvalho, 2004).

If individuals who are desisting are able to help others (e.g., via engagement in voluntary service), this can transform receivers of help into givers of help, which, in turn, may assist their own positive self-identity. In addition to helping individuals desist, the aims are to communicate to a wider community that the person has ceased offending, is (therefore) worthy of support, and has something to offer to others. The perspective is resolutely future-oriented — focused on what the individual who desisted can offer in the future — rather than focused on past mistakes. Both strengths-based and desistance-focused approaches share some similarities — they are future-oriented, less concerned with risk, and more concerned with rehabilitation.

How would these principles work in the United States? Recently, the United States has chosen to go down the route of very high rates of imprisonment; however, this has not always been the case. Until the early 1980s, U.S. imprisonment rates were far lower than they are today. Some of the programs and projects outlined below have operated in prisons, others have been run in the community, and still others have tried to ease the transition from imprisonment to living in the community. The current high rates of imprisonment need to be kept in mind when assessing the interventions below because many operate in criminal justice systems that are less punitive than the one currently adopted in the United States.

Moving closer to the delivery of working practices associated with these perspectives, McNeill (2003) suggested that there are two elements to desistance-focused work: (1) the assessment and planning phase and (2) the actual work. In the assessment and planning phase, assessments should be individualized and related to the specific situation of

each individual. This work, argued McNeill, should be focused on levels of personal maturity, changing social bonds, and the attitudes toward and motivations surrounding crime, as well as the narrative constructions of individuals' past actions and sense of self. At this stage, the criminal justice worker and the person on probation jointly assess how each of the above can — or might in the future — help or hinder an individual's prospects of desisting. Do any of them offer “a hook for change” (Giordano, Cernkovich, & Rudolph, 2002)? The worker and the person on probation need to assess the extent to which these areas are “pulling” in the direction of desistance. Those areas that are will need to be supported. Those that are not may be harnessed to do so, and those that may likely lead to offending will need to be mitigated or defended against. The aim is to reinforce positives and challenge negatives.

McNeill (2003) further suggested that interventions focus on motivations, attitudes, and thinking and values. The aim is to work with families (where appropriate), find suitable accommodation, and develop human and social capital. Writing with a former criminal justice social worker, McNeill suggested a number of principles when undertaking interventions (Weaver & McNeill, 2007):

- Be realistic. Relapse is common, and change takes time. This means that patience is required by criminal justice staff, both those working with people who want to desist and those who are employed in the sentencing of relapses that result in offending.
- Favor informal interventions over formal ones because informal interventions can be more flexible and tend to be less stigmatizing. Formal interventions can also create further formal sanctions if transgressions occur.
- Avoid imprisonment as a sentence in many cases.
- Build good relationships between formal criminal justice organizations and charities and societies that work with persons convicted of crime who have completed any court-ordered punishment.
- Recognize that no two individuals are the same, so a “one size fits all” approach will not work as effectively as approaches that are tailored to the individuals and their pasts, strengths, and desired futures. In short, interventions must be individualized.
- Work with communities. Social contexts are as important as individual contexts.
- Avoid negative terminologies that stigmatize.
- Promote redemption.
- Punishments must end at some point. Recognize and respect these endings.

Barry (2000), inspired by the principles above and her own social work experiences, additionally suggested that criminal justice workers:

- Get to know persons on probation.
- Offer practical help.
- Be encouraging.
- Allow persons on probation to talk about what *they* want.

As part of a United Kingdom Economic and Social Research Council *Insights* paper, McNeill and colleagues (2012a) further argued that people working in the criminal justice system should:

- Work *with* people, rather than work *on* people (i.e., avoid thinking of people as things that need to and can be “fixed”).
- Recognize that relationships matter to persons who desist and harness them to support desistance.

- Try to maintain hope as well as motivation. Hope is a key variable that can support individuals during periods of difficulty and change because it sustains their longer-term goals.
- Develop human capital (the skills needed to complete a task) as well as wider social capital in order for these skills to be employed.
- Avoid identifying people by the behaviors we wish them to leave behind (e.g., “offender”).

In response to the *Insights* paper (McNeill et al., 2012a), Bottoms and Shapland (2019) suggested that criminal justice system staff help people change their daily routines and practice newly developed social identities (such as “parent” and “employee”) to facilitate desistance (p. 257). They also suggested that local criminal justice systems and those delivering services develop 24/7 support services for people facing temptations (Bottoms & Shapland, 2019, p. 257), an idea based on the insights regarding temptations and the loss of motivation developed by Halsey and colleagues (2016). These 24/7 support services could consist of duty staff who are on call outside of normal office hours or a list of people whom the individual could phone or ask for help when needed.

McNeill and colleagues (2012b) argued that correctional services — and judicial systems more generally — must find ways to recognize and “certify” progress and change. In doing so, they should use language that conveys belief in the possibilities of “redemption,” rather than language that reinforces offending identities (Maruna, 2001; Maruna & LeBel, 2003; Maruna, 2011). Examples of these decertification processes are discussed below.

Some of these suggestions will not be easy for individuals or organizations to accept. The criminal justice system is not good at acknowledging that change is a process and there will be episodes of relapse. When people (re)offend, there are often victims who want to see some sort of redress, reparation, and, in some cases, punishment. We cannot “turn the other cheek” to all crimes, especially if the person has offended previously. Some offenses will be so harmful to others that imprisonment cannot be avoided. These issues aside, it is still the case that many people seeking change often relapse in some way and that the process of change will not be neat or linear. The goal would be for criminal justice staff to assess the extent to which an offending episode is part of a process of change, as opposed to a major impediment to the process.

Moffatt (2014, pp. 10-11) argued that management culture in the criminal justice system must accept the main goal of assisting caseloads. Critiquing changes to the English and Welsh criminal justice system, he wrote:

The demand to reach targets affected the working culture within probation. A new level of managers was recruited to deal with the influx of accredited programmes, many of whom did not deal directly with offenders. They were seen as ‘inordinately obsessed’ with meeting targets and practice becoming secondary as ‘it wasn’t their concern.’ Little thought was given to improvements and understanding what constituted good probation supervision. Respondents felt that ‘skills were marginalised’ as a culture of self-defence became the norm, ‘the constructive side of probation began to play second fiddle to the oversight side.’ Frontline practitioners, especially those new to the service, were encouraged to believe if an offender completed a programme they would change. Probation officers stopped home visits and talking to families and in the eyes of some ‘actually didn’t help people.’

Moffatt’s summary continued (2014, p. 11):

Probation lost the desire and motivation to work with offenders leading to a loss of core values, and case management became ‘an administrative function rather than a therapeutic or change focused one.’ Service users viewed probation as ‘an organisation that trips you up and wants to catch you out rather than wanting to help you.’

The underlying message from the above is possibly that even those most entrenched in criminal lifestyles should, at least, be given the hope that change is possible and there is a future for him or her without crime. This notion appears to be sorely lacking in current experiences of supervision, as noted by one of the people Farrall interviewed for his study of the impact of probation supervision on the lives of those being supervised (Farrall, 2002, p. 227):

Something to do with self-progression. Something to show people what they are capable of doing. I thought that that was what [my Officer] should be about. It’s finding people’s abilities and nourishing and making them work for those things. Not very consistent with going back on what they have done wrong and trying to work

out why — ‘cause it’s all going around on what’s *happened* — what you’ve already been punished for — why not go forward into something For instance, you might be good at writing — push that forward, progress that, rather than saying ‘well look, why did you kick that bloke’s head in? Do you think we should go back into anger management courses?’ when all you want to be is a writer. Does that make any sense to you at all? *Yeah, yeah. To sum it up, you’re saying you should look forwards not back.* Yeah. I know that you do have to look back to a certain extent to make sure that you don’t end up like that [again]. The whole order seems to be about going back and back and back. There doesn’t seem to be much ‘forward.’

Reflecting on the wider climate’s impact on desistance opportunities, Shover and Henderson (1995, p. 243, emphasis in original) commented that:

[Current repressive crime control policies] ignore entirely the theoretically obvious: Offenders’ behaviour can be changed not only by increasing threat but by also increasing *legitimate opportunities*. It is important to make this point if for no other reason than the fact that increased legitimate opportunities extend the choices to offenders

Policies, Practices, and Procedures

This section explores studies (sometimes evaluations) that examine interventions, policies, and practices that could assist desistance; they do not always explicitly refer to desistance as a key organizing framework. Nevertheless, even those that do not embrace this terminology have many features in keeping with the desistance-focused or strengths-based perspectives.

This section focuses on four broad areas: changing the assessment lens; strengths-based opportunities to give back; building and supporting jobs, homes, and relationships; and certifying and recognizing change. Where possible, examples of projects that reflect these areas are provided. However, not all of these programs were evaluated. In some cases, assessments that were performed do not meet the highest standards of empirical social science research, as they were sometimes run by practitioners and did not always compare against control or comparison groups. Nevertheless, these schemes provide some clues to interventions that may assist desistance.

Changing the Assessment Lens

The ways in which needs assessments are conducted can be changed to identify an individual’s strengths, such as a strong relationship with law-abiding individuals or an interest or hobby that would allow him or her to build ties to other law-abiding individuals.

Most risk assessment tools (such as SAPROF or SARN-TNA) ask criminal justice staff to score various aspects of an individual’s social and personal circumstances in terms of their risk of further offending. The scales typically run from 0 (no risk) to 10 (high or severe risk). This approach encourages the staff member — and the person being assessed to some extent — to think of the person as the physical embodiment of these risks. Strengths are neither identified nor officially recognized.

One way to alter this would be to extend the scale from -10 (a severe risk) to +10 (a strength), with 0 representing a neutral point, something that is neither a risk nor a strength. Thus, the person being assessed is viewed as having strengths and these strengths are identified so that a program of planned work can focus on their positives.

Strengths-Based Opportunities To Give Back

Many individuals want to give back or make amends for past failings and offending. At an individual level, this can be achieved via sponsorships to complete marathons, for example, with the money going to a good cause. In other cases, this can be arranged at an institutional level. Farrall and colleagues (2014) found that such desires to undertake and experience voluntary work are related to desistance.

Citizens Advice Bureau Employment Scheme

Burnett and Maruna (2006) reported on a scheme run by a local Citizens Advice Bureau in the United Kingdom. Citizens Advice Bureaus offer free advice and advocacy services relating to legal matters to anyone who requests them. These services are offered over the phone and in person at a number of locally based centers.

One center, which was struggling to cope with the volume of calls it received, approached a local open prison — that is, a prison that accommodates low-risk individuals, often near the end of their sentences — to see if it could help. The prison released these individuals on a temporary license to answer calls at the center. Their skill base was refreshed and increased, and they were reacclimated to a working environment. They reported that it was a destigmatizing experience, as well as one that helped create civic values and feelings of having given something back to the community.

Building and Supporting Jobs, Homes, and Relationships

In the mid-1990s, Laub and Sampson were asked to imagine the policy implications of their research. In Laub et al. (1995), they suggested two key ways of turning what we know about why people stop offending into workable policies:

1. Improving an individual's chances for employment. They suggested that education courses and relationships with local employers need to be developed so that individuals who formerly offended or were formerly incarcerated and others in recovery are able to secure meaningful employment.
2. Improving access to spouse and parent training programs so that families stand a greater chance of remaining intact and, therefore, acting as a barrier against reoffending.

Both of these policies were direct follow-ons from their study of why men in Boston ceased offending in the 1930s. Although there is much to commend in these two seemingly very basic initiatives, they deal with human lives that were played out over half a century ago. Nevertheless, as we shall see below, the topics of family and employment are recurrent ones in this strand of work and thought.

Sarno and colleagues' (2000) evaluation of two employment schemes run by probation services in England in the late 1990s is one example of a study that, while embodying many of the core principles of desistance, did not explicitly locate itself within this tradition. Published in 2000 — just as research and thinking on desistance, especially in the United Kingdom, was to be given a massive boost from studies by Maruna (2001) and Farrall (2002) — their evaluation showed the extent to which sensible policies can be (and were) designed without reference to desistance.

Sarno and colleagues (2000) examined two highly innovative probation-based employment and training programs in southeast England. One, called ASSET, was based in London, and the second, called Springboard, was based in Surrey. Both were established in early 1997 and ran for two years. They involved a similar set of services offered to those being supervised by the two local probation services. This included advice and guidance, training, work placements, mentoring, and the provision of employment opportunities. Both programs were primarily designed to improve the employment and training prospects of unemployed persons on probation who were being supervised (the thinking was that employment would reduce the chances of further offending).

ASSET

The ASSET project (run by what was then Inner London Probation Service, ILPS) worked with young people (ages 16-25) being supervised in two inner London boroughs. It was a stand-alone organization that provided one-to-one support and guidance to just over 750 persons on probation referred by ILPS. The key aim was to provide them with the skills and direct work experience needed to subsequently secure meaningful employment. It offered them travel grants, clothing, equipment, and course fees. ASSET stood apart from other probation-run employment, training, and education schemes at that time because it provided:

- A support program that offered basic skills provision.
- Links with local training providers.
- Links with the Prince's Trust, which ran a business start-up program.
- Mentoring.

Among both probation staff and the persons on probation, there was a general feeling that there should be more programs like ASSET. The probation staff who had contact with the scheme spoke highly of both the project staff and the program more generally. Many probation staff felt that ASSET complemented their work because it offered specialist expertise that they could not offer. Meanwhile, many of those supervised felt that ASSET and the wider project had a positive impact on their lives.

Although 43% of the participants were reconvicted within a year of first contact with ASSET during its first year of operation, this compared favorably with the number for those who were referred to ASSET but did not attend (56% were reconvicted within a year). Additionally, participants who were reconvicted were slower to reoffend (151 days) when compared to nonattendees (132 days).

During the period assessed by Sarno and colleagues, individuals referred to ASSET obtained 90 jobs and 12 participants gained national vocational qualification. Research suggested that many of the participants felt their knowledge, confidence, motivation, and employability had increased (Sarno et al., 2000).

Springboard

Springboard, which operated a recycling business, offered an alternative model. This initiative aimed both to offer “sheltered employment” for those on probation who were not yet ready to enter the formal job market and to generate money for the Springboard Trust, which owned the business. Springboard collected a range of used items — used toner and ink jet cartridges, plastic waste, aluminum foil, computers, and office furniture — which was then refurbished by Springboard employees and those referred by Surrey Probation Service. The business also refurbished donated bicycles and made them available to the persons on probation. In addition, Springboard offered advice and support to those who wanted to become self-employed.

In interviews with a sample of persons on probation who were referred to Springboard, few attributed gaining work directly to Springboard. However, many felt that the help they had received had a positive effect on their employability and accommodation status. About 32% of those referred to Springboard in the first year of operation were reconvicted within 12 months. This rose to 45% for 16- to 25-year-olds (Sarno et al., 2000).

Probation staff were initially skeptical. However, over time they came to value the program's work and praised the commitment of Springboard's staff. Interestingly, Springboard's staff was most appreciated for its help with housing. (Surrey is an especially affluent part of the United Kingdom and, as such, affordable housing is scarce and in high demand.) This suggests merit in a holistic approach that addresses accommodation and leisure needs as well as employability, employment, and training.

France has used similar schemes. The programs are run by Foundation Emmaus, which was created by Abbé Pierre, a priest who worked to support people who were homeless in the 1950s.

Working With Persons Incarcerated To Secure Future Employment

Some employers in the United Kingdom actively recruit employees from those serving prison sentences. Possibly the most famous is Timpson, which runs an extensive network of cobblers and locksmiths. The Timpson Foundation has created a series of training academies inside prisons, which train persons who are incarcerated and give them meaningful work rather than menial tasks. When these individuals are released, they are fully trained and able to work in Timpson's high street shops. Someone from the Timpson Foundation often meets individuals at the prison

gates as they are released, then introduces them to their new work colleagues and provides them with a uniform, lunch, and time to settle into their new role. This scheme also applies to those released on temporary license, or “day release” — persons who leave prison in the morning, work in one of Timpson’s shops during the day, and return to prison at the end of the day.

The Timpson Foundation argues that their training academies allow individuals to feel valued and part of the Timpson team, thereby restoring confidence and self-esteem. It estimates that it has a 75% retention rate for staff recruited from prisons. Other firms have copied this approach to training and recruitment.

Jobs, Friends, and Houses

Jobs, Friends, and Houses — run by a charity based in Blackpool, England — trains people in recovery or on release from prison in a range of building trade professions. The aim is to employ them to help renovate and lease domestic properties in the Blackpool area.

An evaluation emphasized the extent to which the program developed its employees’ social and human capital (Hall, Best, & Musgrove, 2019). The scheme used prominent logos on its vans and uniforms to publicly demonstrate that persons who were formerly addicted to drugs and those who were formerly convicted of committing crimes could perform socially beneficial roles in the local community. The program also gave employees a nondeviant sense of identity and meaningful activities outside of work. It provided a social network, which extended to other professional and community groups that could support employees’ needs and recovery processes. By creating legitimate identities in a local area, the scheme helped individuals in their journeys away from crime. Many employees reported that Jobs, Friends, and Houses had played a pivotal part in their recoveries, with reductions in offending and substance use outcomes noted (Hall, Best, & Musgrove, 2019).

Data from a 12-month follow-up study of participants suggested that there had been a 94% reduction in recorded offending rates for the sample as a whole. It also showed an increase of more than £25,000 of tax and national insurance paid by sample members; dramatic savings in costs for mental health, primary care, and emergency services (totaling about £15,000 for the first 12 months); and annual savings of approximately £3,000 per person per year in terms of housing welfare (see Best, Beswick, & Walker, 2016).

Kirkham Family Connectors

Kirkham, a prison in the English county of Lancashire, recognized that one of the problems facing men on release relates to repairing damaged family relationships. If repairing such relationships proves to be difficult, the men may turn to their peer group for support. Since many members of their peer group may either commit crime themselves or be people with whom they had offended, this could potentially lead to further criminal behavior.

Kirkham Family Connectors sought to empower the families of small numbers of men facing release from prison at about the same time so they could access support for their returning family member. The families, who were formed into cohorts of six or seven, were first encouraged to assess the employment, training, recreation, peer networks, and volunteering experiences of their own returning family member. Next, they were asked to think of who could assist them in their existing social network and which new connections they would need to forge. In a subsequent session, they were asked to reflect on how they had used existing networks and forged new ones. The families exchanged barriers and ways to overcome them in group sessions. Over time, those involved moved from helping themselves to helping each other, thus increasing their social capital. Evaluations suggested that the program had increased the confidence of families to seek out support for their returning family member and increased their social capital, well-being, and sense of hope (Best, 2019).

A similar idea is the prison-based “homework club,” where children take their school homework into prison and complete it with their parents who are incarcerated. Such a scheme is being run in England at HMP Wymott.

Restorative Justice Programs

The schemes above — with their emphasis on people in the individual's immediate circle of friends and family members — share much in common with restorative justice programs. Restorative justice sessions include people who are there as supporters; these individuals may serve as potential resources upon which the person can call. The person who offended often apologizes and makes and commits to plans for “giving back” (either to the victim or some other entity). Robinson and Shapland (2008) said that restorative justice both embraces aspects of desistance work and provides a path toward desistance, in that the conferences allow participants to talk about the next few months of their lives (Robinson & Shapland, 2008, p. 348) and build social capital (see also Farrall, 2004), based on their evaluation of a series of restorative justice programs in England.

Israeli Rehabilitation Ranches

In Israel, rehabilitation ranches were run for families with a history of physical abuse. For example, a parent (who had been convicted of abuse) and one of his or her children (who had been abused) spend the day at a rural ranch looking after either a dog or a horse. When they arrive, they must choose which animal they will look after — meaning they have to consider the other's preferences (for example, one of them may not like dogs). They then spend the day together looking after the chosen animal — grooming it, bathing it, feeding it, playing with it, and walking it. This relaxed time spent together focused on the same cooperative task increases the bond between the parent and child and allows them to talk about the concept of “caring.”

Such programs can be redesigned to rebuild relationships between, for example, parents and children who have had prolonged drug addictions, particularly in cases where the child stole from the parents or became estranged from them. They can also rebuild relationships between persons who were formerly incarcerated and their partners and children following separation during periods of custody. Similar schemes exist in France, although they do not presently include family members.

Circles of Support and Accountability

Circles of Support and Accountability partner with English police, probation services, and local public protection teams as well as other professionals working in the field of child protection. They work mainly with persons convicted of sexual offenses.

A Circle of Support and Accountability consists of a group of volunteers (usually four to six) from a local community who form a “circle” of support around an individual who has been found guilty of a sexual offense (the “core member”). The circle provides a supportive network for the core member, but also requires the core member to take responsibility for his or her risk management. For example, circle members help the core member develop his or her social skills, find suitable accommodation, and develop appropriate hobbies and interests. All of the volunteers are informed of the core member's past offending. The circle's main role is to help the core member settle into the community, but it also helps the core member recognize the patterns of thought and behavior that could lead to reoffending.

The core member is included in all decision-making and signs a contract committing to the circle's aims. Each circle meets regularly (usually weekly, initially). Between meetings, the volunteers might also have face-to-face or phone contact with the core member, if needed. The life span of a circle is initially 12 months, but it may be extended if there is a perceived need for continued support. The expectation is that the circle's active involvement will reduce over time as the core member develops other support networks.

The program has six values:

- Safety: The aim is to reduce the incidence of victims in the future.
- Responsibility: Individuals and organizations are held accountable for their actions.
- Inclusiveness: Risks are best managed through processes of inclusion rather than exclusion.

- Community involvement: Community involvement is an important part of rehabilitation.
- Growth and learning: Given the appropriate supports, people can grow, learn, and change their behavior.
- Individuality and respect: Treating people with humanity and respect is a key part of assisting their rehabilitation.

Although Circles of Support and Accountability have been used for those convicted of sexual offenses, they may potentially be extended to include people convicted of other offenses.

Working With First Nationals

Colleagues in Winnipeg, Canada, evaluated a program that works with first nationals (see Deane, Bracken, & Morrisette, 2007; Bracken, Deane, & Morrisette, 2008). The scheme, called Ogijiita Pimatiswin Kinamatwin (OPK), works with Aboriginal persons involved in gangs who show a desire to move away from gang involvement. Interestingly, one can join OPK and remain a member of the gang — a recognition of the transitory nature of desistance.

OPK was formed following a request from the leaders of one of Winnipeg’s better-known street gangs. Its members were in their 20s and had young children. They were tired of contact with the police and of being imprisoned, and they were looking to lead more “legitimate” lives.

OPK works with men who have recently been released from prison after serving sentences of over two years. The men have been involved in street gangs, have typically been involved in low-level drug dealing and inter-gang violence, and were imprisoned for offenses such as manslaughter, weapons offenses, and drug trafficking. OPK, along with first nationals who formerly committed crime, provides training and work in an inner-city not-for-profit housing project. OPK also provides Aboriginal cultural learning, counseling, and referral to educational opportunities. The program seeks to (re)educate the men about their cultural identities and the harm that crime causes to first national communities. It also seeks to alleviate blame from the individuals caught up in crime by highlighting the ways in which the dominant white cultures of Canada have marginalized their communities.

Certifying and Recognizing Change

In addition to schemes that aid relationship-building and the transition into employment and homes, the criminal justice system can take other actions to reform its own internal workings.

Decertification Programs

Building on the insights of labeling theories and interactional sociology, it has long been recognized that the criminal justice system regularly labels individuals (for example, “victim” or “offender”) and that such labels — especially negative ones — are hard to shrug off. In response, some have suggested that the criminal justice system create decertification processes. For example, those who have been sentenced might return to court to mark the end of their sentence and have their progress toward change celebrated and encouraged. If possible, people who will be sentenced later could be present at these end-of-sentence sessions to show them that change is possible and that they, too, might be able to look forward to a similar celebration. Maruna (2011) suggested that certificates of rehabilitation be awarded as part of these sessions, in the way that awards are given at university graduation ceremonies.

Judicial Rehabilitation

In France, criminal records are organized and structured so that they do not hinder access to employment. They are stratified into three groups called “Bulletins.” The highest two tiers are accessible only to the courts and other public services. The third (and lowest) tier is made public. A potential employer might ask prospective employees to provide a copy of the third tier (Bulletin 3), although employers seldom ask for it in practice. However, unlike Bulletin 1 and Bulletin 2, Bulletin 3 contains very little information. For example, prison sentences of up to two years — which are the vast majority of custodial sentences in France — are not mentioned in Bulletin 3.

Furthermore, old court files are destroyed after a certain period of time (Herzog-Evans, 2011). This means that previous convictions cannot be used in some sentencing decisions or to bar people from certain forms of employment. Those who are convicted can ask the courts not to formally record the conviction, which again allows greater chances of employment. Courts can also agree with the individual that achieving some form of behavioral change will signify his or her “redemption.”

Maruna (2011, p. 111) described the possibilities of these approaches for the United States. Maruna wrote that a “certificate of rehabilitation”

... would function as a ‘letter of recommendation’ (Lucken & Ponte, 2008) that can be used with licensing agencies, employers and state officials. When asked if he or she has ever been convicted of a crime, the individual does not respond ‘no,’ but rather ‘yes, but the conviction has been expunged and I have received a certificate of rehabilitation.’ The policy, therefore works ‘not by trying to conceal the fact of conviction, but by advertising the evidence of rehabilitation’ (Love, 2003: 103).

Maruna (2011, p. 112) also referred to a “roll of honour,” whereby the records of persons who were formerly incarcerated would include information about the extent to which they broke institutional rules or were rewarded for good behavior and estimate how likely they are to remain out of trouble. Such approaches have much in common with Clean Slate Acts that some U.S. states have passed in the last few years.

The Road From Crime

In an Economic and Social Research Council-funded project, McNeill and colleagues made a 50-minute documentary film that was shown to stakeholders in British criminal justice settings.¹ The film served as a platform for discussing how probation services could be improved to better facilitate desistance. Below is a summary of the recommendations generated by these discussions, which involved staff, people from charities, service users, former service users, and the families of service users in Glasgow, Belfast, Sheffield, Liverpool, and London.

1. Make greater use of former service users

Both current and former service users could co-design programs, career routes for persons who have reformed, and mentoring schemes for those being supervised or transitioning into different roles in the organization (e.g., from service user to service provider).

2. Reduce reliance on imprisonment

There was a strong sense — even among prison staff — that prison was being used too much. One interesting idea was to bar magistrates — who can only sentence people to a maximum of two years’ custody in England and Wales — from imposing custody at all. The aim was to reserve prison for the most serious individuals.

3. Re-orient the philosophy of probation

Many felt that probation services in England and Wales and criminal justice social work departments in Scotland should focus on the service user’s strengths and aspirations by relying more on community involvement and creativity.

4. Reconnect probation to local communities

As a result of increased workloads and the computerization of assessments and case management, probation staff have become mainly office-based. This was seen as a weakness in the current provision. Probation staff were encouraged to spend less time in the office and more time in the community so they could learn about local job opportunities.

¹ The film, which includes an interview with former NIJ Director John Laub, is available at <https://www.iriss.org.uk/resources/videos/road-crime>.

5. Mobilize wider support networks

For many, employment offers a useful way out of offending. Thus, it was suggested that quotas for employing persons who formerly offended be set for employers over a certain size. Numerous issues would clearly need to be addressed before developing such a program (whether employers have suitable work, for example). However, reductions in business taxes could possibly be provided to employers (such as Timpson) who show a commitment to working with disadvantaged groups in society.

6. Focus on positives, not negatives and risks

Again, there was a sense that assessments should focus on strengths rather than deficits and that assessment systems should be redesigned to embrace positive aspects of an individual's life.

7. Supervision, release, and reintegration

It was also felt that criminal justice systems must find ways of showing that change is possible and highlight the ways in which persons who have desisted can contribute positively to society. Local news media could play an important role in this area.

8. Redraft the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act

In England and Wales, the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act sets the types of previous convictions that one must disclose when applying for employment and the length of time for which one has to disclose these convictions. When convictions reach the age at which they no longer have to be declared, they are referred to as being "spent." There was much discussion about allowing convictions to be spent earlier. Legislation could be enacted so that convictions earned before a certain age (e.g., before one's 18th birthday) no longer need to be declared after, say, reaching the age of 25.

9. Educate the public about desistance

There was a feeling that members of the public were unaware that people stopped offending and could lead positive lives. It was felt that more needed to be done to educate the public about change, how it happened, how often it happened, and how to support it.

10. Give people hope and show them a future

It is now well-recognized that the criminal justice system has become more actuarial in the years since the pessimism of the 1970s. Service users are often seen as risks that need to be managed. One of the things discussed was the notion that the criminal justice system should focus more on hope and become less concerned with risk, pessimism, and failure.

Some Caveats

It is important not to fall into the trap of thinking that promoting desistance is the sole responsibility of the criminal justice system. In fact, it might even be argued that the criminal justice system is poorly positioned to do much about desistance because so much of what appears to be related to desistance is found outside its domain (Farrall, 1995). As Österman (2018) noted in her study, females navigating the route to desistance in Sweden had an easier path out of crime than those in England, due in no small part to Sweden's more developed welfare and social security system. As such, to help ensure desistance is possible, a country can establish, bolster, or maintain a strong welfare system that supports all sections of society. Not only will this help people who want to desist, it will also help those who are best suited to aid in the desistance process, such as parents, partners, wider family members, and charitable organizations.

It is also important to consider the impact of ethnicity on desistance. Very few studies have examined the processes by which different ethnic minorities desist from crime. Calverley (2013) studied three ethnic minority groups living in London — Blacks, Indians, and Bangladeshis — and found that the key processes of family formation and employment were stable regardless of ethnicity. He further found that while religion did not play a part in desistance for Blacks, the concept and implications of being a “good Muslim” were a big part of the desistance process for Bangladeshis. For Indians, who tended to be Sikh or Hindu, religion was only important in that weddings provided opportunities for work. Informal business deals were often completed at weddings, which tended to be very large events held over several days. The religious values themselves mattered little.

Conclusion

It is not always easy to find employment — even less so if a person has few skills, a poor or nonexistent employment record, a criminal conviction, and few relationships with people who work. In addition to referring some persons on probation to employment programs, probation services should attempt to create local jobs for their caseloads. In other words, probation services should provide sheltered employment through schemes like ASSET and Springboard, discussed above. They could provide employment to suit a range of skills and needs. For example, a recycling scheme that sells reclaimed goods and goods made from recycled materials in its own chain of shops would need:

- People to collect the goods for recycling.
- Individuals to sort them for sale or recycling.
- People to make new goods from old materials or refurbish partially damaged goods.
- Individuals to work in the shops.
- Clerical assistants to process payments (to employees) and supervise revenue from the shops.

Although probation caseloads could not meet all of these skills, they could meet many of them. The aim would be to get people to the first rung of the employment ladder: a job. A job provides a record of “employability” — with people who can provide references — and may lead to jobs in other occupations.

Schemes like this offer work with a caring employer (the probation service) that is committed to a notion of social justice and understands the problems facing those on probation, such as needing time off to attend court and probation appointments. As such, they may better secure “good” employment for persons on probation. Probation services could also partner with local employers, who would employ suitable members of the probation services’ caseloads. All parties must accept that these individuals would require additional support and short periods of time off for probation supervision.

Both the desistance literature and some of the interventions discussed above (e.g., Jobs, Friends, and Houses) emphasize the need for good, secure accommodation for people who want to desist and for those who have desisted. There is also a great need for supported housing where rents are affordable, services are available to assist with building maintenance, and there is no danger of being evicted except in the most serious cases.

It is also crucial to support relationships with families, employers, neighbors, colleagues, and third parties. Several initiatives discussed in this paper explicitly aim to strengthen these relationships or make them a supportive social network for people who want to desist.

To both kick-start the desire to desist (if it is absent) and maintain this desire in the face of setbacks, an individual must identify a hook for change — something that will motivate their efforts to desist. These are (at least initially) likely to be quite mundane — for example, regaining or rebuilding a relationship or getting away from the local area. This does not make them any less important, however.

Criminal justice systems must learn how to identify these hooks — and help individuals identify them for themselves too — and then learn how to support these desires. To do so, criminal justice systems will need to change their current approaches and thinking (their system philosophy). They must move away from the current model of “fixing broken people” to one that more readily embraces the idea that those who want to desist:

- Have strengths that can be harnessed (while admitting that there are weaknesses that need to be avoided). This implies a change to assessment procedures.
- Need to be treated individually (at least some of the time) and given opportunities (rather than threats or punishments) to which they will want to respond positively.
- Should be engaged and employed as co-producers of their own (and others’) desistance. This implies greater use of former service users in peer mentoring schemes and as program designers.
- Will face setbacks and relapses during their journeys away from crime. Realism rather than idealism is the watchword here.
- Will find informal, rather than formal, interventions most valuable and meaningful. For example, probation staff could hold meetings with both the person on probation and people who are important to them.
- Do better when they are kept out of prison or sent to prison only briefly (whenever possible).
- Will more likely remain out of trouble when criminal justice system workers operate within the wider social and community contexts in which they live. This means working with religious institutions, employers, community groups, local sports groups, and other organizations based in the community.
- Will do better when the criminal justice system (where appropriate) supports their relationships.
- Should be encouraged to practice newly formed social identities (such as parent, partner, and employee) in supported contexts.
- Should have good progress recognized and, if possible, certified.
- Can be supported in careers (either formal employment careers or careers developed away from the economy, such as school governor, homemaker, and volunteer) by selective access to their previous criminal histories. This may mean refusing potential employers or insurers access to an individual’s conviction records before a certain age (e.g., age 21) or after a certain period of time (such as convictions more than three years old). It may also mean banning access to conviction histories for the vast majority of offenses, with the possible exceptions of some sexual offenses or terrorism.

This paper provided suggestions on how colleagues working in the United States could develop these ideals into workable policies and practices. It is clear that while there are some useful pointers for what can be undertaken, it also remains the case that these interventions need both careful thought and a change in other aspects of the criminal justice systems in all countries in order to transform their basic philosophies from those of suspicion to those of hope.

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Stephen Farrall is a professor and research chair in criminology at the University of Derby, England. He is known for his research into why people stop offending (as well as the fear of crime and politics and crime). His most recent publication is “Politics, Social and Economic Change and Crime: Exploring the Impact of Contextual Effects on Offending Trajectories,” with Emily Gray and Phil Jones, in *Politics and Society*. His recent book, *Respectable Citizens — Shady Practices*, with Susanne Karstedt, won the American Society of Criminology’s White Collar and Corporate Crime Division’s 2020 book award. He is one of the editors of the *British Journal of Criminology* and will serve on the award committee for the American Society of Criminology’s Sellin-Glueck Award in 2022. Also in 2022, the second edition of his first book on desistance, *Rethinking What Works With Offenders: Probation, Social Context and Desistance From Crime*, will be published with critical commentaries from leading experts on desistance from crime.

