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Pathways to Desistance From Crime Among Juveniles and Adults: Applications to Criminal Justice Policy and Practice

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Executive Summary

This paper reviews the empirical literature on desistance from crime among adolescents and adults and the factors that explain (dis)continuity in criminal behavior in the transition to adulthood. It also highlights the implications of this knowledge base for various criminal justice agencies. Drawing on the research literature and relevant theoretical frameworks, the paper offers nine key recommendations on desistance-promoting criminal justice policy and practice.

1. Our criminal justice interventions would benefit from a paradigm shift that expands from an exclusive focus on recidivism to the consideration of positive outcomes that may result in reduced involvement in crime. Program evaluations that prescribe to this new paradigm should: (a) integrate the well-established fact that desistance from crime occurs gradually and that setbacks are to be expected; (b) consider changes in individual and social outcomes in addition to behavioral measures; (c) offer a balanced assessment of both failure and success outcomes and invest resources in tracking progress before, during, and after any given intervention; and (d) provide incentives for success.
2. Biosocial research has suggested that from a cognitive perspective, emerging adults (18-24 years old) may resemble adolescents more than adults. It would then be logical to extend assumptions about reduced culpability to individuals up to the age of 24. Young adult courts are an example of such an accommodation. The age-crime curve confirms that most individuals are likely to give up crime during emerging adulthood; in many cases, criminal justice processing during this period may be counterproductive and might delay the process of desistance from crime that would otherwise occur naturally. Prosecutors play a key role in fostering desistance by avoiding further processing for individuals who do not pose a significant threat to public safety.
3. Longer prison sentences are not effective in promoting desistance from crime and reducing recidivism. In fact, confinement disrupts the desistance process in many ways, and it should be used only as a last recourse. When possible, jurisdictions should favor alternatives to confinement for both juveniles and adults. Few individuals remain active in crime after the age of 40. Barring exceptional circumstances for those who pose a clear threat to public safety, there is no empirical basis for incarcerating individuals for decades past mid-adulthood.
4. Because the decision to give up crime is regarded as a gradual process rather than an abrupt event, preparation for release from confinement should ideally begin early in the sentence for those cases where incarceration is deemed necessary. Individuals can make constructive use of their time in prison if they can find meaning to their sentence, get to the root of the reasons that brought them to prison in the first place, and develop a plan for their return to society. These are essential components of the desistance and reintegration processes.
5. Interactions with law enforcement may disrupt desistance in many ways that are not necessarily well understood by officers. Given that most initial contacts with law enforcement do not result in further criminal justice processing, arrests that do not lead to a conviction constitute a poor measure of criminal behavior and may create unnecessary stigma that hampers the desistance process. This stigma disproportionately affects individuals belonging to socially marginalized groups. Convictions or incarcerations may be more valid indicators of official crime.
6. The stigma of a criminal record has enduring effects on the ability to successfully reintegrate into society. Expungement laws can help offset some of the negative consequences of the stigma of a criminal record.

7. The mere prevalence of past offending is insufficient to assess future risk of reoffending. We need to account for other dimensions of the criminal record, including the recency and intensity of involvement in past crimes. Housing and employment policies that adopt a blanket ban against individuals with a criminal record cannot be justified on the basis of public safety concerns and are in fact detrimental to the process of desistance from crime.
8. Many state and local jurisdictions have developed promising initiatives and interventions that draw on principles of the desistance paradigm, but few have been rigorously evaluated. Partnerships between policymakers, practitioners, and academics are crucial to conducting more systematic assessments. We also need to better understand whether the level of responsiveness to any given intervention varies across demographic groups (specifically age and gender), criminal history characteristics, and histories of trauma.
9. Efforts to promote desistance from crime are not the sole responsibility of one agency. The most promising desistance-promoting policies and practices rely on ongoing partnerships between the various agents of the criminal justice system and community resources, including law enforcement, prosecution, corrections, and community organizations.

Pathways to Desistance From Crime Among Juveniles and Adults: Applications to Criminal Justice Policy and Practice

Introduction

The association between age and crime is one of the most established facts in the field of criminology. It is generally agreed that aggregate crime rates peak in late adolescence/early adulthood (ages 18-21) and gradually drop thereafter. Although most adults who engage in criminal behavior also offended during adolescence, most juveniles who commit crime do not persist in adulthood (Robins, 1978; Sampson & Laub, 1993). This is true even among those who engage in more serious forms of crime (Mulvey, 2011). In other words, desistance from crime tends to be normative in adolescence.

In this regard, the age-crime curve creates a paradox. Individuals are more susceptible to crime in late adolescence and early adulthood, but they are also more likely to abandon criminal behavior after this period. As such, some of the more punitive criminal justice interventions targeting adolescents and emerging adults may interrupt an otherwise downward slope of criminal behavior. Given the overrepresentation of minority youth at all stages of the juvenile and criminal justice processes — including arrest, pretrial confinement, prosecution, sentencing, and incarceration — the stigma of criminal justice responses overwhelmingly affects youth belonging to marginalized groups (Howell, Feld, & Mears, 2012).

Adolescence is a period marked by significant psychological, biological, and social changes. Offending behavior is one of many possible responses to the lack of access to adequate resources or supportive environments to cope with these developmental transitions (Butts, Pelletier, & Kazemian, 2018). In 2019, adolescents (7%) and emerging adults (ages 18-24; 20%) accounted for more than one quarter of all arrests.¹ It has been estimated that 30% to 60% of adolescents with an arrest will also be arrested in early adulthood, but the rates of persistence in crime decline steadily with age (Piquero, Hawkins, & Kazemian, 2012). The degree of continuity in offending is more pronounced in official records when compared with self-reports of crime (Farrington, Piquero, & Jennings, 2013). This may reflect the system's bias: Once a person is known to the police and has a criminal record, he or she may be more likely to be sanctioned for his or her behavior.

Decisions to give up crime may involve several relapses and reversals of decisions before reaching the final point of giving up crime permanently. It is important to distinguish three related concepts in the study of the abandonment of criminal behavior: recidivism, termination, and desistance. Recidivism refers to the act of repeat offending. It is a discrete event, measured by the commission of a new crime, and it is often the main outcome used to assess the effectiveness of criminal justice interventions. Termination refers to the point at which an individual commits his or her last crime. Unlike termination and recidivism, desistance from crime is regarded as a process rather than an event. It is broadly defined as the process involving a series of cognitive, social, and behavioral changes leading up to the cessation of criminal behavior (Kazemian, 2015a). By highlighting the importance of tracking both positive and

¹ <https://ucr.fbi.gov/crime-in-the-u.s/2019/crime-in-the-u.s.-2019/topic-pages/tables/table-38>.

negative changes in individuals' lives, the desistance paradigm offers valuable insight for juvenile and criminal justice interventions.

This paper provides an overview of the mechanisms underlying the process of desistance from crime among juveniles and adults and the implications for criminal justice policy and practice. The first section describes the known correlates of desistance from crime as well as the features of offending patterns that are associated with continued involvement in crime. The subsequent sections examine the implications for criminal justice interventions and agencies, including law enforcement, courts, supervision, correctional facilities, and reintegration efforts.

What Do We Know About the Process of Giving Up Crime?

Criminal Career Features Relevant to the Study of Desistance

Researchers have identified the basic parameters of a criminal career:² the age of onset, prevalence, frequency, specialization/versatility, seriousness, co-offending patterns, duration, and termination/desistance (Piquero, Farrington, & Blumstein, 2003; Piquero, Hawkins, & Kazemian, 2012). Appendix 1 includes a summary table of these parameters. This section focuses on those parameters that are most relevant to the transition between adolescent offending and adult crime.

Age of onset refers to a person's age at the time of the first offense. An early onset of offending (i.e., 10-12 years old) is associated with longer and more active criminal careers when compared with a later start (Farrington & Hawkins, 1991; Le Blanc & Fréchette, 1989; Loeber & Le Blanc, 1990; Loeber et al., 2008). Delaying onset can affect the length and intensity of the criminal career (Farrington et al., 1990). There are two main explanations for the link between age of onset and persistence in crime: It can be a result of underlying time-stable individual traits (i.e., the persistent heterogeneity argument) or it can be due to the criminogenic effect of past offending on future crime (i.e., the state dependence perspective) (Nagin & Farrington, 1992).

Prevalence measures the proportion of individuals who engage in crime at a given point in time. Self-report surveys indicate that almost all individuals engage in some form of law-breaking behavior by their early 30s (96%) and 40s (nearly 100%) (Farrington, 1989, 2001). Prevalence rates usually follow the age-crime trend: a steady increase up to late adolescence, followed by some stability, and then a general decline (Piquero, Farrington, & Blumstein, 2007). There has been some debate about whether the decline observed in the age-crime curve reflects a decrease in the number of people who engage in crime or a decline in the overall number of crimes committed by those who remain active in crime (Blumstein, Cohen, & Farrington, 1988). Research on residual criminal careers has suggested that a small fraction of individuals continue to commit crimes at a higher rate well past the peak of the age-crime curve (Blumstein, Cohen, & Hsieh, 1982; Kazemian & Farrington, 2006, 2018).

There is some degree of continuity in offending between adolescence and early adulthood (Jennings et al., 2015; Tracy & Kempf-Leonard, 1996), but it is attenuated after emerging adulthood and with longer observation periods. It is difficult to make accurate long-term predictions about desistance based on early childhood and adolescent risk factors (Kazemian, Farrington, & Le Blanc, 2009; Laub & Sampson, 2003; Morizot & Le Blanc, 2007).

The *frequency* of offending denotes the number of crimes committed by individuals. Like prevalence rates, frequency usually peaks in late adolescence, followed by a general pattern of deceleration (i.e., a reduction in offending frequency) with age. This is true for violent and nonviolent offenses. Crime frequency declines with age even for those who persist in offending (Sampson & Laub, 2003). However, the downward trend is more erratic for frequency than for prevalence, especially in a person's 30s (Piquero, Farrington, & Blumstein, 2007).

² A criminal career is defined as the "longitudinal sequence of offenses committed by an offender who has a detectable rate of offending during some period" (Blumstein, Cohen, & Farrington, 1988, p. 2). A criminal career can be short or extend over many years, and include several crimes or as few as two offenses. The term "career" should not be taken in the sociological sense; it is not meant to imply that individuals who engage in crime derive their livelihood exclusively or even predominantly from crime (Farrington et al., 1990).

Escalation refers to the increase in offending severity over time. There is some evidence of an increased risk of violent offending between late adolescence and emerging adulthood (Farrington, 2001; Le Blanc & Fréchette, 1989). The degree of continuity in violence between adolescence and adulthood has greatly varied across research samples. Because individuals who commit crime tend to be versatile, the types of offenses committed in adolescence are not necessarily predictive of adult offending. Rosenfeld, White, and Esbensen (2012) noted that even serious forms of violence generally follow the typical age-crime trend. Homicide tends to be a one-time occurrence, and thus individuals engaging in these offenses are not generally at risk for persistence (barring exceptional types, such as individuals who commit serial or mass murders).

The *duration* of a criminal career refers to the time interval between the first and last crimes. Duration has been estimated to be between four and 12 years for most individuals (for a review, see Kazemian & Farrington, 2006) and 16 years (on average) with extended follow-ups (to age 56) (Kazemian & Farrington, 2018). These figures should be interpreted with two caveats in mind: They have largely relied on official data (arrests or convictions), and the duration estimates do not consider the nature of the repeat offenses. For instance, Kazemian and Farrington (2018) noted that most convicted offenses (nearly 80%) consisted of nonviolent crimes.

Estimates of duration provide a sense of the aggregate length of a criminal career, but they do not inform us about individual risk. Research on *residual* criminal careers has examined the age-crime patterns of individuals actively engaged in crime by estimating the number of crimes and years remaining in criminal careers based on a variety of indicators (Kazemian & Farrington, 2006, 2018). Residual career length (the number of years remaining up to the point of the last offense) and residual number of offenses (the number of offenses remaining in criminal careers) decline at a remarkably steady pace with age. Offending may spread out over several years, but individuals may commit few offenses during this time. Early risk factors, such as the age of onset, lose some predictive power after mid-life (see also Sampson & Laub, 2003). Offense type is not typically associated with the number of years and offenses remaining in criminal careers, which does not lend support to policies that automatically regard individuals convicted of violent offenses as “high risk.” Lastly, residual criminal careers decline with increasing time since the last offense, with a particularly sharp decline after the five-year mark. In other words, individuals who refrained from offending for a period of five years showed marked declines in their residual criminal careers.

In short, although some features of adolescent offending are associated with a higher likelihood of adult crime (e.g., age of onset), each parameter alone is insufficient to explain the risk of reoffending. Assessments of risk must also consider other indicators, such as the recency of the offense and past offending rate. The parameters presented above highlight the correlates of continued involvement in offending, but it is equally important to understand the mechanisms underlying the process of desistance from crime.

Correlates of Desistance From Crime³

Several criminological theories have offered frameworks to explain the process of desistance from crime. These theories and correlates of desistance have been reviewed thoroughly in the literature (Farrall et al., 2014; Rocque, 2017) and will only be summarized here. The correlates of desistance from crime in adolescence and adulthood share many similarities and vary in form rather than substance. It is also important to note that although most criminological theories were developed based on predominantly male samples, theories of desistance generally appear to be applicable to females. Still, some gender differences emerge in the correlates of desistance. For instance, parenthood is more strongly linked to desistance among women, whereas employment and peer influences may be more likely to accelerate or disrupt the desistance process among males (Rodermond et al., 2016).

Social Correlates of Desistance

Scholars have stressed the central role of strong ties to social institutions (e.g., family, marriage, employment, school, and religion) in explanations of desistance. This framework argues that the strength of bonds to conventional social

³ This section draws heavily from Kazemian (2020).

institutions is the driving force behind desistance from crime. Relationships with parents, schools, and peers are more influential in adolescence, whereas marriage and employment gain importance in the transition to adulthood (Sampson & Laub, 1993).

Several decades of research have highlighted the strong link between marriage and desistance from crime (Bersani, Laub, & Nieuwbeerta, 2009; Doherty & Ensminger, 2013; Farrington & West, 1995; Horney, Osgood, & Marshall, 1995; Sampson & Laub, 1993, 2003), but the timing and quality of marriage are also important (Theobald & Farrington, 2009; Laub, Nagin, & Sampson, 1998). Laub and Sampson (2003) summarized the key processes involved in the effect of marriage on desistance from crime: reduced deviant peer associations, exposure to new friends and extended family, changes in routine activities, residential changes, parenthood, and shifts in self-identity. Similarly, cohabitation has also been linked to reductions in criminal behavior, and some research has noted a cumulative effect of parenthood and union formation on desistance from crime (Savolainen, 2009).

Other social institutions, such as employment and religion, have been linked to the desistance process. Employment has been identified as a correlate of desistance from crime, but it may be more effective during specific periods of the life-course (Morizot & Le Blanc, 2007; Uggen, 2000). The link between religion and desistance has been inconsistent (Bouffard & Jin, 2019), but some research suggests that religion and spirituality may promote desistance from crime by their influence on morality (Pirutinsky, 2014) or by stimulating a shift in identity (Giordano et al., 2008).

Attachments to social institutions may also promote desistance by severing ties with friends who may encourage criminal behavior and by increasing interactions with prosocial others (Warr, 1998; Wright & Cullen, 2004). Peer encouragement can compel young people to engage in offending (Paternoster et al., 2013). Although leaving a gang can result in reduced violent offending (Thornberry et al., 2003; Krohn & Thornberry, 2008), relatively few studies have looked at the link between gang membership and desistance from crime. Findings from the Pathways to Desistance Study have suggested that disengaging from gangs can reduce offending behavior in the short term, but not necessarily in the long term (Sweeten, Pyrooz, & Piquero, 2013).

The structural characteristics of a neighborhood may create significant barriers to the desistance process. Communities characterized by low average income and higher crime rates may be conducive to juvenile offending (Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997). Neighborhoods, through their impact on institutions that are known to promote desistance from crime (e.g., marriage and employment), may play a key role in the transition from juvenile offending to adult crime (Horney, Tolan, & Weisburd, 2012). For instance, neighborhoods with high unemployment rates offer limited opportunities for job stability. The same is true in neighborhoods where marriage is less likely or not expected.

In sum, life events may exert varying influences on the desistance process across individuals. This is largely dependent on how these events are experienced and whether they bring a sense of meaning to one's life. Subjective individual experiences are central to understanding the process of desistance from crime.

Individual Correlates of Desistance

Several cognitive transformations have been associated with desistance from crime.⁴ These include shifts in identity, cognition, and emotions, as well as the process of maturation.

The impact of maturation on desistance has been addressed at length in Danielle Boisvert's paper (2021) and will not be reiterated here. This framework stipulates that physical, intellectual, emotional, and psychological development explain the decline or cessation of offending behavior, and that these developmental factors cannot be overlooked in our understanding of desistance from crime, particularly in the transition from adolescence to adulthood. Desistance from offending in adolescence has also been linked to increased psychosocial maturity (Monahan et al., 2013).

Criminological research has drawn attention to the importance of identity transformation in the desistance process (Bottoms et al., 2004; Paternoster & Bushway, 2009; Giordano, Cernkovich, & Rudolph, 2002; King, 2013). Maruna

⁴ For an extensive review of cognitive transformations linked to desistance, see Anderson and McNeill (2019).

(2001, p. 7) concluded that developing a “coherent, pro-social identity” and a positive self-image are essential components of the desistance process. The individuals who were on a path to desistance in Maruna’s study believed that they had a “good core self” and that they were (and had always been) fundamentally good people who were led into bad circumstances.

Anderson and McNeill (2019) detailed the cognitive skills that are central to the desistance process. These include effective decision-making, human agency, emotional regulation, executive functioning, and the ability to resist temptations (i.e., self-control). Self-control was long regarded as a stable individual trait (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990), but researchers have underlined the dynamic nature of self-control (Na & Paternoster, 2012) and the individual strategies developed to cope when it is deficient (Shapland & Bottoms, 2011). Unsurprisingly, substance use is likely to impede the desistance process since it affects a person’s ability to think rationally (White et al., 2002). Drug and alcohol use can be particularly disruptive to young adult development (Hussong et al., 2004).

Giordano and colleagues’ (2002) theory of cognitive transformation described the cognitive shifts that promote the process of desistance: an openness to change, exposure to prosocial experiences that will further promote desistance (e.g., employment, marriage), adherence to a new prosocial and noncriminal identity, and a shift in the perception of the criminal lifestyle (i.e., the negative consequences of offending become obvious to the individual).

Emotional processes are also important in the explanation of desistance from crime. Anger and depression can hamper the desistance process (Giordano, Schroeder, & Cernkovich, 2007). The feeling of perceived injustice can be a powerful fuel for persistence in crime (Kazemian, 2020). Generativity — the process of developing concern for others and providing help — has been linked to positive emotions (LeBel, 2007). Researchers have stressed the importance of motivation and hope in the desistance process (Farrall, 2002; Farrall & Calverley, 2006). However, we also know that hope and the desire to change may be insufficient in the face of overwhelming structural barriers (Bottoms et al., 2004; Carlsson, 2016).

Racial and ethnic inequality can be a major impediment to the process of desistance from crime. Fader and Traylor (2015, p. 252) noted that the challenges among African Americans are “conceptually and empirically inextricable from social class and urban poverty” and “the interplay between racial and criminal stigma may make it more difficult for people of color to craft desistance narratives and conceive of a law-abiding replacement self.” There are significant obstacles to developing a desistance narrative in the face of double stigma resulting from one’s minority and criminal status (Pager, 2003). Social environments characterized by disadvantage and exclusion render desistance efforts particularly challenging (King, 2013). This is an important issue given the well-established overrepresentation of minorities, especially Black males, in the American criminal justice system (National Research Council, 2014). This may lead criminal justice agencies to assume that members of minority groups have inherently higher inclinations to criminality. The data do not support this assumption. Loeber and Farrington (2011) found differences in the prevalence of violent offending across racial groups, but these differences dissipated when accounting for social and structural risk factors, such as exposure to a high-risk family environment, being on welfare, or living in a high-crime neighborhood.

Integrated Explanations of Desistance

Desistance from crime is more likely to occur in the presence of both cognitive changes and adequate social support. There is evidence to suggest that life events are consequences, rather than causes, of desistance. In other words, decisions to give up crime precede entry into marriage, employment, or parenthood. Lyngstad and Skardhamar (2013) followed a sample of Norwegian males for a period of five years before and after marriage. They found that reductions in criminal offending were initiated in the years preceding marriage and thus were not a result of marriage. Similar results were found in analyses of the effect of parenthood (Monsbakken, Lyngstad, & Skardhamar, 2013; Theobald, Farrington, & Piquero, 2015) and employment (Skardhamar & Savolainen, 2014) on offending. It is also important to note that turning points are not necessarily the objective measures that we assume them to be; marriage is not always beneficial, and separation is not always detrimental. Subjective perceptions and interpretations of life events are important (Massoglia & Uggen, 2007).

In short, debates about the superiority of one theoretical framework over another may not be fruitful. Different theoretical explanations may have relevance for different individuals. The underlying mechanisms triggered by life events and the meaning granted to life experiences, which can vary a great deal across individuals, are central to the explanation of desistance from crime. Importantly for criminal justice policy and practice, efforts to make long-term predictions about desistance have not yielded impressive results (Kazemian, 2015b). Desistance is likely to occur as a result of various turning points and cognitive shifts that occur throughout the life-course, rather than being determined by early risk factors. This is good news for interventions that can potentially deviate offending trajectories and accelerate the process of desistance from crime.

Recidivism-Focused Versus Desistance-Promoting Interventions

Some guiding principles have emerged from the knowledge base to steer efforts to develop desistance-promoting interventions. First, there is a need to move past a purely recidivism-focused approach. The complete abandonment of offending activities is unlikely to occur suddenly, especially among individuals who have been highly active in offending from a young age. Criminologists generally agree that desistance is best perceived as a process rather than a discrete event, but this perspective has not yet been integrated in our policies and practices. Our interventions favor a result-oriented approach and fixate on recidivism as an indicator of success and failure, which may overlook changes and progress exhibited in other behavioral, cognitive, and social outcomes (Kazemian, 2015b). We largely continue to use recidivism as an inverse measure of desistance, most likely due to the convenience and availability of recidivism data. The assessment of desistance would ideally expand beyond offending outcomes and account for improvements in mental health, cognitive patterns and emotional regulation, social bonds, and (re)integration efforts.

The effectiveness of most interventions continues to be assessed based on the absence of negative outcomes. The youth justice system inhibits its own effectiveness when it focuses solely on negative outcomes as indicators of success because it is not set up to track and identify positive changes (Butts, Pelletier, & Kazemian, 2018). Positive youth development is a “programmatically framework that encourages service providers to concentrate on the ability of all young people to thrive when they experience positive relationships and meaningful activities in supportive and safe environments” (Butts, Pelletier, & Kazemian, 2018, p. 1). This paradigm involves tracking not only recidivism, but also various positive outcomes that can foster the process of desistance from crime, such as healthier relationships with adults and peers, academic or vocational engagement, improved self-esteem, conflict resolution, stress management, empathy, and compassion.

Butts and colleagues (2018) summarized the key features of several programs and models that are consistent with the positive youth development paradigm. These include Developmental Assets (Search Institute of Minneapolis), the 5 Cs model of youth development (Tufts University), the Youth Program Quality Assessment Model (David Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality), the Positive Youth Justice Model, and Youth Thrive (Center for the Study of Social Policy). These interventions look beyond recidivism and track positive changes, shift the focus from deficits to strengths, and promote approaches that seek to connect adolescents with positive resources that can help them make progress in the desistance process.

Some of the most effective interventions for adolescents have acknowledged that (1) family support is key to stimulating positive change and (2) success is more likely when it draws on support from various resources in the youth's life. For instance, models such as Functional Family Therapy (FFT) and Multisystemic Therapy (MST) have been shown to reduce juvenile offending and “induce adolescent desistance” (Rocque, 2017, p. 203; Welsh et al., 2012). FFT has been successfully implemented in at least 24 states, and MST has been successfully implemented in at least 34 states (Elliott et al., 2020).

With regard to gang prevention programs, some interventions may affect gang membership but they may not necessarily reduce offending behavior (Esbensen et al., 2013). For instance, the Gang Resistance Education And Training (G.R.E.A.T) program — one of the largest scale gang prevention initiatives in the country — is a school-based prevention program that includes a curriculum led by police officers in middle schools. An early evaluation of the G.R.E.A.T. program did not find any significant long-term effects on gang membership or delinquency. Changes were implemented to improve the G.R.E.A.T curriculum (Esbensen et al., 2002). In its revised version, the program

resulted in short-term reductions in gang involvement and improved relationships between youth and the police, but it did not reduce delinquency. Although G.R.E.A.T. and other gang prevention programs (see Wong et al., 2016) may not have successfully reduced offending, they nonetheless tackle some of the risk factors linked to criminal behavior, which may ultimately foster the process of desistance from crime. Gang membership is likely to end before the peak of the age-crime curve (White, Loeber, & Farrington, 2008), which highlights the ephemeral nature of adolescent gangs (Thornberry et al., 2003). Aggressive strategies that aim to dismantle the gang may have the unintended consequence of crystallizing gang identification and lead to its persistence, rather than allowing it to follow its natural and transitory course (Klein, 1995). Formal intervention may not always be the most productive course of action.

Among adolescents and adults alike, evidence suggests that punitive responses may not be effective in reducing reoffending and that the effects of punishment may spill over to the broader community. School suspensions and expulsions can significantly increase the likelihood of subsequent criminal justice involvement (Ramey, 2016; Mowen & Brent, 2016). Although some evidence suggests that we may have downplayed the role of selection bias in the association between school discipline and academic outcomes (Anderson, Ritter, & Zamarro, 2019), punitive school climates (characterized by high rates of suspensions) have been found to adversely affect school performance, even among those who are not subject to the disciplinary action (Perry & Morris, 2014).⁵ Because punitive climates may be detrimental to all members of a community, alternative strategies such as restorative approaches should be considered to address behavioral problems, when appropriate. The findings for restorative justice initiatives in juvenile justice appear to be promising, but more rigorous evaluations are needed before we can draw any firm conclusions (Wilson, Olaghere, & Kimbrell, 2017). During periods of rising crime rates, pressing public safety concerns may compel us to focus on evidence-based practices rather than invest resources in interventions that have not been subject to thorough evaluations. Given that juvenile arrest rates have been declining since the late 1990s and reached a new low in 2019 (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2020), this may be an opportune time to implement and evaluate innovative practices and interventions that may promote the process of desistance from crime among adolescents and young adults.

Desistance-Promoting Law Enforcement

Police arrests can negatively affect known correlates of desistance, including educational outcomes such as high school graduation (Kirk & Sampson, 2013; Dennison & Demuth, 2018), commitment to school (Wiley, Slocum, & Esbensen, 2013), and college enrollment (Widdowson, Siennick, & Hay, 2016), as well as later employment outcomes (Dennison & Demuth, 2018). Police contact may also trigger mental health issues (e.g., stress, anxiety, depression), which can, in turn, affect cognitive abilities and performance in school; this seems to be especially true for youth of color (Legewie & Fagan, 2019). Among young adults, at least two forms of contact with the criminal justice system — arrest and incarceration — have been linked to poor mental health outcomes (i.e., mood and anxiety disorders) (Sugie & Turney, 2017). Contact with law enforcement may disrupt the desistance process by excluding access to key social institutions (e.g., job market, educational opportunities, housing, family ties) as a direct consequence of the label.

Drawing on four waves of longitudinal data involving more than 2,000 middle school students who were matched on their propensity to experience police contact or arrest, Wiley and colleagues (2013) found that young people who were arrested by the police reported higher rates of subsequent delinquency when compared to those who were only stopped. Similar results were observed for those who were stopped versus those who had no police contact. Police contacts resulted in the development of a “deviant identity” as well as increased associations with peers who engage in delinquency, which are well-established barriers to desistance from crime. A Chicago study using matched samples found similar results: Self-reported violent offending was significantly higher among youth who had been arrested when compared with those who did not experience arrest (Lieberman, Kirk, & Kim, 2014). These findings suggest that law enforcement practices that involve a high rate of stops (e.g., stop, question, and frisk) and few actual apprehensions may be detrimental to the process of desistance among young people.

⁵ Conversely, a disruptive environment may adversely affect schoolwide achievement (Kinsler, 2013), which suggests that disciplinary actions may counter the negative effects of more extreme forms of disruptive behaviors.

Police contacts disproportionately implicate members of minority groups (Bishop, 2005). A study conducted in St. Louis (MO) found that traffic stops were most likely to result in searches when they involved a white officer and a Black driver (about 8% of stops) and least likely with a Black officer and a white driver (1.5% of stops) (Rojek, Rosenfeld, & Decker, 2012). Aggressive law enforcement strategies, which involve widespread police intervention even with limited suspicious behavior, may “[exacerbate] preexisting inequalities for an expanding group of already disadvantaged individuals” (Brayne, 2014, p. 19) and heighten mistrust of authorities among youth (Shedd, 2015). Given that police contacts are heavily skewed toward racial and ethnic minorities, arrests that do not lead to a conviction are not only a poor indicator of criminal behavior, they may also create undue stigma based on incidents that do not necessarily reflect offending risk.

Law enforcement strategies that offer promising insight for desistance efforts involve active partnerships with the individuals who engage in offending and other agents of the criminal justice system, and tackle perceptions of legitimacy and procedural justice. Rooted in problem-oriented policing, the focused-deterrence model emerged from the Operation Ceasefire initiative in Boston in the 1990s (Kennedy, Piehl, & Braga, 1996). The focused-deterrence approach to policing (also referred to as “pulling levers policing”) (Kennedy, 1997) involves collaborative efforts between law enforcement, community leaders and organizations, and social services agencies to inform individuals engaging in specific crimes that these behaviors would not be tolerated in the community. If individuals persist in the offenses of concern, law enforcement then resorts to “pulling all levers” available to them to sanction the behaviors, ranging from Internal Revenue Service audits to stricter sanctioning of low-level offending.

In their meta-analysis, Braga, Weisburd, and Turchan (2018) concluded that focused-deterrence strategies led to significant reductions in crime as well as diffused benefits to neighboring areas. Braga and colleagues (2018) noted that the “network of capacity” is essential to the successful implementation of focused-deterrence programs (Braga & Winship, 2009), and effective focused-deterrence strategies require careful planning and structure (Braga, Turchan, & Winship, 2019). No single agency can address gang violence on its own, and collaborative efforts between law enforcement, prosecution, and probation agencies are essential to the success of focused-deterrence strategies. Partnerships between law enforcement and social service agencies can help to divert youth away from arrests and toward social services that may be more conducive to desistance from crime (Schiraldi, Western, & Bradner, 2015). For these alliances to be effective, a cultural shift is needed, not only in police training and education but also in public perceptions about the role of law enforcement. Criminal justice agencies and institutions of higher education fulfill an important role in shifting some of the traditional portrayals of the police.

Desistance-promoting law enforcement strategies also involve legitimacy-based interventions, which expand upon the traditional deterrence framework to include perceptions of legitimacy and procedural justice. These programs are based on the premise that individuals are less likely to commit crime if they regard laws as legitimate and if they perceive the actions of those who enforce them to be fair and just (Tyler, 1997; Papachristos, Meares, & Fagan, 2012). When youth are discontent with their treatment by the police, they are more likely to engage in delinquency and resort to violence to resolve disputes (Slocum & Wiley, 2018). Law enforcement stops that do not lead to arrest may result in civic disengagement and mistrust (Lerman & Weaver, 2014). Perceptions of fair treatment and legitimacy of the police have been inversely linked to violence-promoting beliefs (Jackson et al., 2013). When individuals perceive that they have been treated unfairly by law enforcement, they may develop feelings of anger and resentment and have less respect for laws and the police (Barkworth & Murphy, 2015).

Using a quasi-experimental design, Wallace and colleagues (2016) examined the impact of Chicago’s Project Safe Neighborhoods on reoffending rates. Specifically, they assessed the impact of Offender Notification Forums, which bring together individuals who engage in criminal acts, law enforcement, service providers, and community leaders in discussions to address the levels of violence in the community. Wallace and colleagues (2016) found that these forums significantly reduced the risk of reimprisonment and the prevalence of serious crime and resulted in longer time periods out of prison. Longer intervals between offenses are an indicator of progress in the process of desistance from crime (Kazemian & Farrington, 2006, 2018).

Overall, the findings presented here suggest that policing initiatives that combine elements of focused deterrence and legitimacy show great promise for the development of desistance-promoting law enforcement strategies. Rather than relying solely on coercion tactics, these interventions regard individuals as active agents in their process of

change. Providing individuals with an opportunity to move away from crime does not ensure that they will rise to the occasion, but permanent change is more likely when it is chosen rather than imposed.

Police-led juvenile diversion efforts offer an alternative option to court processing and help avoid some of the negative consequences associated with a juvenile record. These initiatives can take the form of a caution or a final warning and can be combined with other treatment modalities. Police-led diversion practices have been found to have promising effects on the reduction of offending behavior, at least among adolescents with limited prior involvement with the juvenile justice system (Wilson, Brennan, & Olaghery, 2018). More systematic implementation and evaluations of these interventions are needed.

Some evidence has suggested that restorative strategies in law enforcement can help prevent repeat offending and foster the process of desistance from crime (Sherman & Strang, 2007). Restorative policing involves meetings between individuals who have been accused or convicted of crime and those who have been affected by the offense; these initiatives are led by law enforcement officers and seek to achieve some level of reconciliation. The 12 experiments examined by Sherman and Strang (2007) — conducted in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia — generally found that reconvictions were less common among individuals who had been randomly assigned to restorative justice interventions versus those who were not; this was true for both adults and juveniles.

Of course, police contact is sometimes inevitable. Crimes do occur, and law enforcement must respond to these incidents. However, most contacts with law enforcement do not lead to an arrest or a conviction (Rosenfeld & Fornango, 2012), and we need to revisit the misconception that unproductive police stops and arrests bear no consequences. Police officers may not be aware of the harm caused by a stop that does not lead to an arrest or an arrest that does not result in a conviction, especially among minority youth who may experience these contacts more frequently. Aggressive law enforcement strategies not only harm the relationships between the police and the community, but they can also impede an individual's path toward desistance by perpetuating stigmatization, labeling, and feelings of injustice, and by their detrimental impact on perceived police legitimacy. When the public perceives that aggressive law enforcement strategies have gone too far and no longer views the system as legitimate, this creates a climate in which even justified arrests may be regarded as unjust. Conversely, although over-policing can impede desistance efforts, some scholars have cautioned about the perils of *under*-policing. They have stressed the need to shift the conversation from “defunding the police” to developing alliances with community partners that may offer some of the skillset and expertise that would complement law enforcement strategies (Brunson, 2020).

Promoting Desistance in the Courts

Courts, prosecutors, and judges can play a key role in the process of desistance from crime based on how they choose to process cases. As in other stages of the criminal justice process, sentencing practices have disproportionately affected racial and ethnic minorities, especially the poorest, and have led to the notable overrepresentation of African American and Hispanic individuals in the criminal justice system (Blumstein, 2004; National Research Council, 2014). There are a number of relevant issues to consider in the link between court practices and desistance from crime, including the adverse impact of custodial sentences on reoffending and on known correlates of desistance, the discretionary power of prosecutors, and the consideration of age in sentencing decisions.

The Link Between Sentence Severity and Reoffending

Sentence severity does little to prevent reoffending. We know that custodial sentences can disrupt the desistance process, either by directly promoting criminal behavior through labeling and stigmatization or by adversely affecting ties to social institutions (for a review, see Kazemian & Walker, 2019). The length of a prison sentence is unrelated to the risk of future offending (Loughran et al., 2009; Snodgrass et al., 2011). One study showed that individuals randomly assigned to more punitive judges (i.e., judges who resorted to incarceration more often and for longer periods of time) were not less likely to reoffend (Green & Winik, 2010).

Punishment does not appear to be effective in curtailing recidivism among juveniles (Lipsey, 2009; Lipsey & Cullen, 2007). In a systematic review including 7,304 juveniles from 29 studies with rigorous methodological designs (i.e., random assignment to court or more informal processing), Petrosino and colleagues (2010) concluded that court

prosecution not only failed to reduce reoffending, it in fact increased it. The authors recommended that jurisdictions examine their policies to assess whether more juvenile cases could be dismissed or diverted away from prosecution. At best, juvenile incarceration bears no impact on recidivism. More likely, it impedes the process of desistance from crime and promotes continued offending. These findings support efforts to avoid juvenile system processing when possible (i.e., in the absence of a serious public safety concern) to prevent persistence in crime beyond adolescence.

Evidence from the Netherlands and Australia has suggested that alternatives to incarceration — including community service and suspended sentences — may be more effective in preventing reoffending when compared with short prison sentences (Weatherburn, 2010; Wermink et al., 2010). Similar results were observed in the United States. Using matched samples, Mears, Cochran, and Bales (2012) concluded that prison sentences are more likely to result in increased offending behavior when compared with probation. Overall, imprisonment yields higher post-release reoffending rates when compared with community sanctions (Bales & Piquero, 2012). It is possible to reduce our reliance on confinement without compromising public safety; New York, New Jersey, and California have succeeded in simultaneously reducing their incarceration and crime rates (Greene & Schiraldi, 2016).

The Role of Prosecutors

Prosecutors have been referred to as “gatekeepers to the criminal justice system” (LaGratta, 2020). They have a great deal of power in determining who gets punished and for how long. There is limited research on how different prosecutorial practices affect juvenile desistance or persistence in crime (Howell, Feld, & Mears, 2012), but some scholars have highlighted the crucial role of prosecutors in driving incarceration rates.

Pfaff (2017) dispelled some of the myths underlying the rise of mass incarceration in the United States. He argued that the exponential increase in the recourse to imprisonment was not due to the war on drugs or even the imposition of longer prison sentences. According to Pfaff, the steady increase in the number of prosecutors in the United States and their growing discretionary power were the main drivers of increased incarceration rates. Prosecutors have a great deal of discretionary power in determining whether to charge or dismiss a case, the severity of the charges, the conditions of a plea bargain, and an individual’s trajectory in the criminal justice system. The number of prosecutors nearly doubled between 1970 and 2007, from 17,000 to 30,000. This increase was particularly significant after 1990. Despite declining crime rates, this period was marked by a rise in felony charges. Pfaff noted that the vast majority (about 95%) of criminal cases are resolved by plea bargains, which may fuel recidivism if these cases result in more recourse to incarceration. He suggested that it may be wiser for mayors and local officials to appoint prosecutors and judges, which may make them less sensitive to public opinion than if they are elected. Pfaff also highlighted the importance of changing district attorney culture.

There are some promising initiatives in prosecution. For instance, Fair and Just Prosecution “brings together newly elected local prosecutors as part of a network of leaders committed to promoting a justice system grounded in fairness, equity, compassion, and fiscal responsibility.”⁶ This network aims to shift the traditional prosecutor culture by educating newly elected prosecutors, creating partnerships with academic institutions and other organizations, moving “beyond incarceration-driven approaches,” and offering a reform-driven model of prosecution. Fair and Just Prosecution has understood the unique needs and challenges of emerging adults (18-24 years old). The recommended guiding principles for young adult justice set forth by Fair and Just Prosecution (2019, p. 13) are highly consistent with the desistance paradigm:

1. Adopt the least restrictive sanction possible, and if incarceration is absolutely necessary, couple it with meaningful rehabilitation options.
2. Recognize that “failure” is an expected step, and zero-tolerance policies are counterproductive.
3. Use YA [young adult] research to inform program development, incentives, and responses.
4. From the courtroom to detention facilities to treatment providers, interactions should be respectful and trauma-informed.

⁶ <https://fairandjustprosecution.org/about-fjp/our-work-and-vision/>.

Fair and Just Prosecution (2019) provided examples of policies adapted to young adults. For instance, New York, Washington, D.C., Michigan, and Alabama enacted laws that enable courts to deviate from mandatory sentences for young adults and resort to expungement for past convictions. Lastly, Fair and Just Prosecution offered several examples of jurisdictions that have developed alternatives to prosecution and incarceration for emerging adults, including Common Justice in New York, Roca in Massachusetts, and Lone Star Justice Alliance in Texas.⁷

Post-arrest diversion programs seek alternatives to adjudication that may prevent youth from further progressing in the criminal justice system. In Detroit, the Correct Course program provides a wide range of services to youth and their families for a period of three to six months, including individualized needs planning, academic tutoring, job training, parenting education, conflict resolution, and individual and family counseling, as well as mental health and substance use interventions. Hodges and colleagues (2011) found that community alternatives to adjudication resulted in low recidivism rates in a one-year follow-up (7.7%); only 1.3% of program participants exhibited escalation in their offending patterns. It costs approximately \$1,500 per participant to provide services for a period of six months; this suggests savings ranging between \$7,500 and \$22,000 when compared with the traditional adjudication alternative. This study did not include a control group. As such, conclusions about the program's effectiveness are premature, but it provides insight into the type of juvenile intervention that may be conducive to desistance from crime. Rigorous evaluations are needed before we can draw firm conclusions about the effectiveness of diversion programs on recidivism and desistance.

The Consideration of Age in Prosecution

The United States Supreme Court has acknowledged the reduced culpability of adolescents in three landmark cases: *Roper v. Simmons*, *Graham v. Florida*, and *Miller v. Alabama*, which banned the death penalty and life imprisonment without the possibility of parole for juveniles, regardless of the nature of the crime. Danielle Boisvert's paper (2021) highlighted some of the reasons underlying the Supreme Court's decision: immaturity, reduced capacity for impulse control, and a limited sense of responsibility.

Evidence suggests that the practice of transferring adolescents from juvenile to criminal court does not exert a significant effect on aggregate juvenile violent crime (Steiner & Wright, 2006). It contributes to higher individual recidivism rates (Bishop & Frazier, 2000) and adversely impacts other correlates of desistance from crime (e.g., lower income in adulthood) (see Taylor, 2015). Howell and colleagues' (2012) review of research confirmed that transferring youth to the adult system has detrimental effects on the likelihood, rate, and seriousness of reoffending.

Given what we know about brain development and psychosocial maturation, courts could also consider the possibility of raising the age of criminal responsibility and extending the juvenile status into emerging adulthood. In 2014, following recommendations issued by a Dutch Study Group on the transition between juvenile delinquency and adult crime, the Dutch government acknowledged the compelling empirical evidence on youth development and passed legislation for the special treatment of individuals between the ages of 16 and 23 years old. As a result, judges in the Netherlands now apply juvenile justice rules to this age group. The Dutch Study Group was modeled after a similar study group that was held in the United States and funded by the National Institute of Justice.⁸

In recent years, many state jurisdictions have ceased processing 16- and 17-year-old youth in adult criminal courts. Vermont was the first state to raise the age of criminal responsibility in 2018. The state now includes 18-year-olds in its juvenile justice system and, effective in 2022, it will also include 19-year-olds. Similar reform discussions are occurring in Massachusetts and California.⁹ This is certainly a good starting point, but it does not correspond to the developmental transition ages identified by researchers. Young adult courts focusing specifically on 18- to 24-year-olds may offer an alternative to the adult criminal justice system. These courts would ideally work with adolescent development experts to develop case plans that focus on fostering desistance from crime, successful reintegration, and "developmentally appropriate alternatives to incarceration" (Schiraldi, Western, & Bradner, 2015, p. 10). Some

⁷ For an overview of innovative perspectives on prosecution, see LaGratta (2020).

⁸ The proceedings from these meetings were published in an edited volume (Loeber & Farrington, 2012).

⁹ <https://thecrimereport.org/2020/05/18/ma-ca-next-states-to-consider-raise-the-age/>.

jurisdictions (e.g., San Francisco and New York) have adopted some version of the young adult court through partnerships with the district attorneys' office.

Desistance-Promoting Supervision

We find ourselves not only in an era of mass incarceration, but also of mass supervision (Phelps, 2017; McNeill, 2019). The Pew Charitable Trusts (2018) reported that 1 in 55 Americans find themselves on community supervision; this rate is as high as 1 in 23 for the Black population, in contrast to 1 in 81 for whites. More intensive forms of probation supervision have not been found to reduce reoffending (Hyatt & Barnes, 2017). Stephen Farrall's paper (2021) highlighted the elements of effective probation supervision and they will not be repeated here. A few points, however, are worth reiterating.

Rather than fulfill its original mandate of serving as an alternative to incarceration, supervision — probation, parole, and extended supervision — can feed mass incarceration and may constitute a major barrier to the process of desistance from crime. A report published by Human Rights Watch and ACLU (2020) found that a significant proportion of state prison admissions occurred as a result of technical violations (more than 50% in 20 states and as high as two-thirds in six states). Similar findings were noted in a five-year follow-up study published by the Bureau of Justice Statistics, which drew on the population of individuals who were released from incarceration in 2005 in 30 states (Durose, Cooper, & Snyder, 2014). One in four (25.3%) individuals released was arrested for a violation of the conditions of community supervision. Another 39.9% were arrested for “other public order offenses,” such as the failure to appear or obstruction of justice, “which in some jurisdictions may be the legal response to probation or parole violations” (Durose, Cooper, & Snyder, 2014, p. 9).

These data suggest that our current supervision system may be well equipped to detect recidivism, even in its most minor form, but may not be conducive to desistance from crime. Supervision violations may affect other factors that are linked to recidivism, such as access to public assistance programs (e.g., public housing, food stamps). Many of the obstacles underlying supervision violations — poverty, addiction, mental illness, and racial and ethnic bias — are difficult to overcome even if individuals exhibit an extraordinary level of motivation to turn their lives around. It may be that probation and parole officers use technical violations to justify revocation when criminal behavior is suspected but difficult to prove. We do not have any large-scale data available to explore this question.

Officers may differ in their supervision styles. A Dutch study identified the practices of “highly engaged parole officers” (Doekhie et al., 2018). Parole experiences that were predominantly surveillance-focused were not deemed to be particularly helpful for desistance efforts. In contrast, the rehabilitation-focused approach appeared to be more effective in promoting desistance from crime. The parole experience was most conducive to desistance when those on parole regarded parole officers as supporters rather than mere enforcers, when the officers could acknowledge the “trial-and-error nature of the desistance process” (p. 502) and did not automatically revoke parole as a result of a violation of the conditions of release. The quality of the relationship with the parole officer plays an important role in the desistance and reintegration processes of individuals with a history of incarceration; it is also predictive of recidivism (Chamberlain et al., 2018). In the “assisted desistance” model, probation and parole officers provide reinforcement and encouragement when necessary, but they allow individuals to exercise agency in their own process of change.¹⁰ Imposed change is unlikely to yield long-term results, but practitioners can certainly help plant the seeds for positive change.

Doekhie and colleagues' (2018) research, and many other studies conducted in Europe, inevitably raise the question of whether such supervision practices are possible in the United States, where the incarceration rate is about seven times higher than in European countries. For the rehabilitation-focused approach to be a viable option in the American context, we need to: (1) decrease the workload of parole officers by reducing our reliance on incarceration, cutting the number of people under correctional control, and shifting resources from control strategies to parole and reentry initiatives that support rehabilitation and reintegration, including the possibility of training more parole officers; and (2) follow the lead of other countries and offer social work training to parole officers so that they may be better equipped to support individuals in their efforts to give up crime.

¹⁰ For a review on the topic of assisted desistance, see Villeneuve, F.-Dufour, & Farrall (2021).

The desistance knowledge base is clear on one issue: Informal control mechanisms are more effective in triggering individual change and promoting the process of desistance from crime when compared with formal control mechanisms, which may rather serve to detect, temporarily delay, or even encourage recidivism. Probation and parole administrators would benefit from striking a better balance between informal (including the relationships with supervision officers) and formal (curfews, returns to prison for technical violations, etc.) control structures (Byrne, 2012). Desistance-promoting supervision is not limited to the tasks of monitoring behavior, detecting failures, and enforcement; it also entails tracking and capitalizing on individual progress and success. There are examples of desistance-promoting probation practices that draw on principles of the positive youth development model,¹¹ but systematic evaluations are lacking.

Some promising findings have emerged from the Maryland Department of Juvenile Services, which implemented an initiative that aims to promote more effective supervision practices, create a stronger balance between sanctions and incentives, and prevent custodial placements (i.e., the Accountability and Incentives Management, AIM, system) (Farrell et al., 2020). This intervention draws on the deterrence framework and seeks to implement swift, certain, and proportionate responses to behaviors. Findings from this initiative suggested that AIM supervision reduced the likelihood of probation violation, residential placement, and recidivism. We need more initiatives of this nature, along with more rigorous evaluations, to assess the effectiveness of interventions that offer a better balance between sanctions and incentives in reducing offending behavior.

The climate is ripe for reform in our supervision practices. A group of current and former leading authorities in community supervision agencies has called for “probation and parole to be substantially downsized, less punitive, and more hopeful, equitable and restorative.”¹² Many of the suggested reforms are consistent with principles of the desistance paradigm, such as the possibility of reducing the length of the supervision period through good behavior and milestones, conditions of supervision that are tailored to the needs of each individual, and a reduced recourse to incarceration for technical violation and low-level offenses.

Desistance From Crime in the Context of Incarceration

The United States remains the world leader in incarceration. The growth in incarceration rates has been particularly pronounced for women since 1980, with an imprisonment rate that has been twice as high as for men.¹³ The harms of incarceration for individuals, their families, and their communities have been abundantly documented (National Research Council, 2014).

We know relatively little about the individual, behavioral, and social changes that occur over the course of a prison sentence. Research and theorizing on the desistance process during periods of confinement have been especially limited (Kazemian & Travis, 2015). A prison sentence can promote desistance if individuals can find meaning to their lives and discover ways to make constructive use of their time while in confinement (Kazemian, 2020; Schinkel, 2014). There are some qualitative accounts of positive transformations and desistance from crime in prison (Kazemian, 2020), but these changes have not been captured in large-scale quantitative research. Although few studies with strong methodological designs have assessed the impact of incarceration on desistance from crime, the existing evidence suggests that in the aggregate, our prisons in their current form do little to reduce recidivism and promote desistance (Nagin, Cullen, & Jonson, 2009; Mitchell et al., 2017). The imprisonment-recidivism link appears to be particularly pronounced for men (Mitchell et al., 2017). Prison impedes desistance from crime by: (1) harming ties to key social institutions, (2) neglecting the mental health needs and trauma histories of individuals who are incarcerated, (3) disproportionately focusing on rule violations and failing to track and reward progress, and (4) creating an environment that may be incompatible with the outside world. These observations bear relevance for both juvenile and adult incarceration.

¹¹ See the example of New York City, <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/probation/services/youth-thrive.page>.

¹² <https://www.exitprobationparole.org/statement>.

¹³ <https://www.sentencingproject.org/publications/incarcerated-women-and-girls/>.

First, prison impairs ties to social institutions, such as family, employment, and education (National Research Council, 2014). Individuals who are incarcerated and wish to maintain contact with their family members face a wide array of barriers (Braman, 2004; Comfort, 2008; Christian, 2005). Incarceration increases the risk of separation (Turney & Wildeman, 2013). Men who are married when entering prison are more likely to separate from their partners when compared with the general population, and those who are unmarried are less likely to get married later in life (Western, 2006). Imprisonment reduces the likelihood of employment after release, even among those who serve short prison sentences (Apel & Sweeten, 2010; Bäckman, Estrada, & Nilsson, 2018).

Second, there is a high prevalence of trauma and mental health disorders among the prison population (Fazel & Danesh, 2002; Wolff, Shi, & Siegel, 2009; Western, 2018). Time in prison may trigger mental health impediments, or it can exacerbate a pre-existing condition (Schnittker, Massoglia, & Uggen, 2012). Individuals who are incarcerated are more likely to have been exposed to early risk factors, such as addiction, child abuse and neglect, and childhood poverty (Schnittker, Massoglia, & Uggen, 2012). Adolescents who have been adjudicated tend to have a higher prevalence of mental health issues when compared with the general population (Cocozza & Skowrya, 2000; Snyder, 2004; Teplin et al., 2007). Physical and mental health issues that persist at the time of release may negatively affect employment and family stability and impede successful reentry (Link, Ward, & Stansfield, 2019). Unresolved past trauma, which often originates long before prison, can feed intense feelings of injustice, anger, despair, and powerlessness, creating major barriers to desistance from crime (Kazemian, 2020). Individuals who are incarcerated need more targeted and regular mental health follow-ups that tackle the root causes of violence.

Third, prison misconduct can be a poor indicator of desistance from crime. Although some research has found that prison misconduct is a significant predictor of post-release recidivism (e.g., Cochran et al., 2014), these studies do not take into account the level of involvement in misconduct or the reasons for engaging in these behaviors. Given the restrictive nature of the prison environment, rule-breaking behaviors may reflect attempts to survive and cope with imprisonment (Ugelvik, 2014). Individuals can engage in rule-breaking behaviors in prison and, at the same time, maintain a narrative that is consistent with the desistance framework (Kazemian, 2020). Rule violations are not always indicative of an intention to persist in crime. Ghandnoosh (2018) highlighted the paradox between the importance granted by parole boards to the maintenance of social ties during periods of incarceration and the intolerance to misconduct aiming to sustain these ties (e.g., possession of contraband mobile phones and excessive physical contact with family members during visitations).

Although rule-breaking behavior in prison is often promptly sanctioned, progress is seldom acknowledged and rewarded. Positive changes that are unrecognized by others are referred to as “invisible desistance” (Kazemian, 2020). Our prisons have few mechanisms in place to recognize any form of progress exhibited by individuals who are incarcerated over time. The lack of positive reinforcement diminishes the level of motivation and investment in the process of change. The severity of the offense remains one of the top overriding factors in release decisions (Ruhland et al., 2016).

Fourth, prison adaptation creates many incongruences with the outside world. Prison interventions should be designed to ease the transition to the community after release. Temporary releases from prison provide an opportunity to bridge this gap; these programs have been linked to a reduced likelihood of post-release unemployment and a lower rate of return to prison (Helmus & Ternes, 2017). Individualized sentence planning (i.e., a sentence plan that is tailored to the individual’s needs) should ideally begin during the initial phase of the sentence and draw on principles of the strengths-based approach. The view that preparation for release is not relevant during the early stages of a prison sentence is out of date and inconsistent with what we know about the process of desistance from crime.

Individuals may adopt strategies that are well adapted for survival in prison, but that may be unsuitable for life on the outside (Jamieson & Grounds, 2005; Kazemian & Travis, 2015; Kazemian, 2020). These coping strategies may include a loss of empathy for others, self-isolation, emotional suppression, becoming “hardened and emotionless,” heightened feelings of mistrust toward others, learning to be “hateful,” and a progressive detachment from the outside world (Kazemian, 2020). To promote desistance from crime and successful reintegration, our prisons need to be more compatible with the outside world. One thing is clear: Our prison system, in its current form, makes it extremely difficult for individuals to thrive during and after periods of incarceration.

Prison-based interventions are implemented across the country, but rigorous evaluations remain scarce and the effects of most prison programs on recidivism and desistance remain unknown (Byrne, 2020). The National Research Council (2014) summarized some of the most promising prison interventions for juveniles and adults in efforts to reduce recidivism: cognitive behavioral therapy, substance use treatment, educational programs, and vocational training — although systematic evaluations have been scarce. Specifically, the report noted that “research has as yet not resolved the critical issues of what works for whom, when, why, and under what circumstances” (p. 197). For instance, prison education programs may have differential effects on post-release employment and recidivism outcomes depending on the level of education attained (i.e., high school or GED versus post-secondary degree) (Duwe & Clark, 2014). We still know little about how to adapt desistance-promoting interventions to the prison setting; research and systematic evaluations are lacking in this area. It is also crucial to better understand whether program participation constitutes a signal of desistance (Byrne, 2020).

Few studies have investigated the impact of quality of life in prison on recidivism and desistance from crime. One study found that disciplinary segregation affects employment and recidivism outcomes after release (Wildeman & Andersen, 2020). Some research has underscored the features of the architectural design of prisons that may be conducive to more effective rehabilitation services and that may “inspire prisoners and motivate them to lead better lives” (Jewkes, 2018, p. 329; see also St. John et al., 2019). These are key areas for exploration as we work on reimagining our prison system.

Desistance-Promoting Practices in Reintegration Efforts

The obstacles faced by individuals who were formerly incarcerated are similar to the impediments identified in the research literature on desistance from crime. These include strains on family relationships, difficulties in securing housing, lack of marketable skills, laws and policies that restrict hiring of individuals with a history of incarceration, limited access to educational resources, unemployment, physical and mental health issues, and substance abuse problems (National Research Council, 2014; Petersilia, 2009; Richards & Jones, 2004; Travis, 2005; Travis & Petersilia, 2001). Young people may face unique reintegration barriers upon release from secure confinement, such as the school’s lack of receptiveness to receiving them, undiagnosed developmental disabilities, a return to violent family environments, crime-promoting peer networks, and challenges in securing employment due to low educational attainment (Howell, Feld, & Mears, 2012). Two crucial areas are often at the core of social policies that impede successful reintegration and desistance from crime, especially in the transition to adulthood: housing and employment.¹⁴

Stable housing is widely recognized as an integral component of personal and family well-being (Bratt, 2001; Lee, Tyler, & Wright, 2010). The ability to secure housing after release from prison has been associated with lower rates of recidivism (Makarios, Steiner, & Travis, 2010; Petersilia, 2009). Individuals with a history of incarceration are more likely to face housing insecurity (Geller & Curtis, 2011). Access to housing affects other barriers to successful reintegration. For instance, housing security is a key factor in both obtaining and maintaining employment (Bradley et al., 2001). It provides an environment in which the individual can reconnect with his or her family after a prison sentence, and may reduce the likelihood of reoffending (Hairston, 2003; Sullivan et al., 2002).

Employment is also a key factor in successful reintegration after release from prison. Individuals who cannot secure employment after release from custody are at an increased risk of recidivism (Petersilia, 2009; Wang, Mears, & Bales, 2010; D’Alessio, Stolzenberg, & Eitle, 2014). The experience of incarceration results in a decreased likelihood of securing a job, especially one with reasonable pay (Western, 2002). A study commissioned by the Pew Charitable Trusts (2010) found that employment disadvantage resulting from imprisonment reduced wages by an average of \$179,000 by age 48, excluding wages lost during incarceration.

Some surveys have suggested that approximately 40% of employers would not hire an individual with a criminal record (Holzer, Raphael, & Stoll, 2007; Pager, 2007). Policies that restrict access to employment are particularly detrimental to the desistance process because integration to the job market is vital to fulfill basic financial needs.

¹⁴ This section draws on Kazemian and Walker’s (2019) review.

Employment discrimination is heavily skewed toward minorities. In the context of employment, Pager (2003) found that the likelihood of securing employment was lower among Black males *without* a criminal record (14%) than among white males *with* a criminal record (17%). White males without a criminal record were most likely to be called back by employers (30% of cases), whereas Black males with a criminal record were least likely to be called back (5% of cases).

The Limits of Criminal History as an Indicator of Future Offending

Criminal history information has become increasingly accessible to the public, including potential employers, landlords, and even romantic partners (Uggen & Blahnik, 2016), and this has intensified the labeling effects of a criminal record. The potential for misuse, labeling, and discrimination has increased with the widespread online availability of criminal records information (Lageson, 2020; Lageson & Maruna, 2018). This new reality highlights the potentially crucial role of expungement laws, which can reduce the stigma of a criminal record, level the playing field, and produce better employment outcomes without any detriment to public safety (Prescott & Starr, 2020).

Not all criminal records are equal. Criminal histories have a diminished ability to accurately predict offending behavior over time, and the mere existence of a criminal record is not sufficient to predict the risk of reoffending. This bears relevance for various social policies — including housing and employment decisions — that rely on criminal records searches to assess risk. Two features of a criminal history are noteworthy.

First, the amount of time elapsed since the last offense is an important feature of criminal histories. There is no compelling empirical evidence to suggest that old criminal records are predictive of future offending. Kurlychek and colleagues (2006, 2007) estimated that the future arrest risk of individuals who remain arrest-free for approximately seven years becomes nearly indistinguishable from that of individuals with no criminal record. Researchers agree on this point: The longer the time interval since the last crime, the less likely it becomes that the individual will engage in crime in the future (Blumstein & Nakamura, 2009; Kazemian & Farrington, 2006, 2018). Lifetime bans against individuals with a criminal record have no empirical basis.

Second, the degree of involvement in crime (i.e., the total number of crimes committed) is also an important factor in the assessment of risk. Combined with recency, a higher frequency of past crimes is more likely to indicate a pattern of persistent offending (Moffitt, 1993; Piquero, Farrington, & Blumstein, 2003). Individuals who offended only once pose a reduced risk of reoffending when compared with individuals who have committed a higher number of crimes in the past (Zara & Farrington, 2016). Hester (2019, p. 370) concluded that “if prior record is being used in some part as an indicator of recidivism risk, then at a minimum, jurisdictions should validate their criminal history scores and adjust accordingly.”

Desistance-Promoting Reintegration Policy and Practice

Some laws create unnecessary stigma and social exclusion with no pragmatic benefit. For instance, some research has suggested that individuals convicted of sex offenses will not typically be reconvicted for another sex crime, even over long follow-up periods (i.e., 35 years) (Hargreaves & Francis, 2014). In fact, most juveniles convicted of sex offenses do not have sex offense convictions in adulthood (Lussier & Blokland, 2014). Consequently, lifetime sex offender registration laws have limited public safety benefits, impede reintegration efforts, and may promote reoffending among individuals who would have otherwise desisted from crime. We need reentry practices that reward paths to redemption.

Travis (2000, p. 8) offered a new vision for reintegration in the form of “reentry courts.” In an ideal world without budgetary constraints, these post-prison courts would feature “a ‘contract’ drawn up between court and offender, discretion on the judge’s part to impose graduated sanctions for various levels of failure to meet the conditions imposed, [and] the promise of the end of supervision as an occasion for ceremonial recognition.” Importantly, this model would provide positive reinforcement in the form of public ceremonies to acknowledge success. The National Research Council (2008) noted the implementation challenges in the original Reentry Court Initiative, spearheaded by the Office of Justice Programs. Reentry courts seem promising to foster desistance-promoting reintegration, but

better implementation and evaluations are needed. Individualized reentry plans prior to release would also help ease the transition to the community, but this practice cannot realistically be adopted until we reduce the size of our prison population (National Research Council, 2008).

There are several promising intervention models that are consistent with a desistance-promoting reintegration framework. For instance, the Reentry Partnership Initiative involves collaborative efforts between law enforcement and correctional agencies. This model is based on a problem-solving approach and entails police involvement at all three phases: the institutional phase, the structured reentry phase, and the community reintegration phase. Police “visit offenders in prison prior to release ... and when police interact with offenders once they return to the community, it is *before*, not after, a problem occurs” (Byrne & Hummer, 2004, p. 68). This approach highlights the benefits of interagency collaborations in fostering desistance from crime, both for juvenile and adult reentry efforts (Watson, 2004).

Another desistance-promoting reentry intervention is the EMPLOY program, an initiative adopted in Minnesota to help individuals obtain and retain employment after release from incarceration (Duwe, 2015). This program involved two eight-hour meetings with a job training specialist about 60 to 90 days prior to release, with an assessment of the individual’s skillset, résumé preparation, and guidance on how to conduct a job search and interviews. Participants were required to produce a résumé prior to release. Meetings continued between participants and job retention specialists one month, three months, six months, and 12 months after release. Using a matched sample, results showed that individuals who participated in the initiative were less likely to be rearrested, reconvicted, or reincarcerated or to have their parole revoked due to a technical violation when compared with the matched group who had not participated in the program.

The EMPLOY program highlights four crucial elements of a successful reentry program. First, the intervention was initiated prior to release, which better prepared participants for the transition to the outside world. Second, the follow-up continued on a consistent basis in the year following release; this is a particularly crucial time because most relapses into recidivism tend to occur in the short time following release (Alper, Durose, & Markman, 2018). Third, the program tackled one of the major barriers to successful reentry and to the process of desistance from crime — employment. Lastly, the program was not imposed on individuals; the participants became active agents in their reintegration process.

Finally, reintegration can be most effective when it draws on the strengths and skillsets of the community that has been directly involved in the criminal justice system. Individuals who have successfully transitioned from incarceration to life on the outside serve as excellent mentors to those who are in the early phases of reentry. Therapeutic communities and programs such as Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous, which are led by credible messengers, offer valuable and crucial support to individuals as they face the challenges of returning to society. Such mentoring initiatives can cultivate desistance efforts and help both the person providing the help and the person being helped (Riessman, 1965; Maruna, 2001; LeBel, 2007).

Conclusion

This paper summarized the state of knowledge on desistance from crime, particularly as it pertains to the transition from adolescence to adulthood, and offered applications to various areas of criminal justice. Some concluding observations are offered below.

The key distinction between recidivism-focused and desistance-promoting approaches is that the former predominantly focus on a negative outcome (i.e., crime), whereas the latter seek to track positive outcomes that may result in reduced involvement in offending over time and ultimately lead to the complete cessation of criminal behavior. Because progress and positive change are seldom acknowledged, many individuals involved in the criminal justice system find little incentive to engage in efforts to make progress toward desistance. For practitioners and policymakers, a paradigm shift from recidivism to desistance entails a willingness to: (1) make assessments that extend beyond behavioral outcomes and include other known correlates of desistance, (2) track progress as well as failures, and (3) recognize that setbacks are part of the process of change. Interventions such as Operation Ceasefire have taught us that to prevent more serious forms of crime, we sometimes need to have some tolerance for more

minor forms of law violation that do not necessarily compromise public safety. Research is needed in this area to assess the threshold that constitutes a temporary setback versus an indication of continued persistence in crime. The importance of shifting from a recidivism-focused to a desistance-promoting approach has been acknowledged on a theoretical level, but it has not yet been integrated in our intervention efforts. We need to better specify what a desistance-promoting model would look like in practice.

No single criminal justice agency can promote desistance on its own. Partnerships across state and federal agencies — along with the support of family and community resources — are instrumental in supporting the process of desistance from crime and reducing recidivism. Some of the most promising criminal justice interventions have relied on collaborative efforts between law enforcement, prosecution, correctional agencies, the community, and individuals involved in offending. To maximize the odds of desistance from crime, the juvenile justice system specifically would greatly benefit from more structured partnerships with other systems that serve youth, including mental health, child welfare, and education services.

The empirical literature has identified different prompts for desistance from crime, whether they be in the form of marriage, employment, peer relationships, or changes in identity. Ultimately, there is no single framework that will explain desistance for all individuals. The ability of life events to shape behavior depends on the extent to which they enable individuals to find purpose and meaning to their lives. The same is true for our assessment of criminal justice interventions. Instead of simply asking *what works*, the better questions are: *what works, for whom, and when?* There is no one-size-fits-all program that is effective for everyone, juveniles and adults, at all stages of the life-course.

Evidence-based programs in juvenile justice are scarce and, among those that do exist, few have been adopted at the national level (Elliott et al., 2020). Elliott and colleagues (2020, p. 1320) noted that “it is naive to assume that once a new innovative program or practice has been demonstrated to be more effective than existing institutional practice it will be widely disseminated within a year or two, and within a few more years will be firmly embedded in any institutional system.” This is true not only in juvenile justice but in institutional systems more broadly. Ultimately, social policy reform takes time, and the impact of our efforts may not be immediately detectable on a large scale. If rehabilitative interventions have failed to exert a significant impact on recidivism rates, it may be that we have not yet achieved the type of broad implementation that would be required to see a change in aggregate reoffending rates.

Desistance-promoting interventions logically aim to tackle the individual risk factors that are conducive to crime, but we also need to acknowledge the systemic inequities that render desistance from crime difficult to achieve, even with the highest level of motivation to change. The social climate is now ripe for us to reexamine laws that result in the disparate treatment of communities of color (Ghandnoosh, 2015; Bradner & Schiraldi, 2020). The exposure to socioeconomic disadvantage and the accumulation of traumatic experiences across the life-course can fuel intense feelings of anger and perceived injustice. These are some of the greatest individual impediments to the process of desistance from crime (Kazemian, 2020).

There will inevitably be a small proportion of individuals who will defy the predictions of the age-crime curve and remain active in crime later in life. We cannot ignore the risk that these individuals pose to public safety, and they should be assessed on a case-by-case basis. However, it would be unwise to implement criminal justice policy and practice on the basis of these outlier cases. Imposing more punishment than what is necessary needlessly delays the process of desistance from crime for individuals who would have otherwise desisted naturally.

Many of the ideas suggested in this paper can be effective only if we reduce the number of people under correctional control. Some of the desistance-promoting supervision strategies that have been embraced in Europe cannot be realistically adopted in the United States if parole and probation officers continue to be responsible for an exceedingly high workload. We need to reassess the extent to which we punish all individuals who offend, even those who have engaged in violent crimes; they represent more than half of those incarcerated in state prisons (Carson, 2020). Mauer (2015) called for a 20-year cap on federal prison sentences, with provisions to extend these sentences in exceptional cases. This is a laudable suggestion, but given that incarceration rates are mostly driven by state-level criminal justice policies, states need to be at the helm of criminal justice reform.

To conclude, advocating for a reduction in the number of people incarcerated for violent crimes does not suggest that we should tolerate violence, but rather that we should shift our focus from reactive responses to preventive strategies to address the problem. A desistance-promoting criminal justice system would resort to the harshest forms of punishment as a last recourse, not as the first option. Retributive sanctions may serve a moral purpose, but we must acknowledge that they are often at odds with the desistance framework and crime prevention efforts. We need courageous leaders who are receptive to adopting innovative strategies to reduce reoffending and who are willing to invest in long-term solutions that will promote desistance from crime. These commissioned papers are a strong step forward in that direction.

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Appendix 1: Concepts of the Developmental Perspective in Criminology

Concept	Description
<i>Descriptive Parameters</i>	
Prevalence/ Participation	Proportion of individuals in a population or sample who committed one or more crimes; can be current (e.g., one year) or cumulative (i.e., lifetime prevalence)
Frequency/Lambda	Number of crimes committed by an individual within a given time period; can be annual or cumulative (i.e., the entire criminal career)
Crime mix	Number of individuals who have committed each of the different categories of crimes considered
Seriousness	Can be determined based on legal classifications (e.g., misdemeanor vs. felony) or by ratings of severity by experts or the population
Variety	Number of categories of crimes committed by an individual
<i>Temporal Boundary</i>	
Age at onset	Age at which an individual commits his or her first crime
Age at termination	Age at which an individual commits his or her last crime
Duration	Time interval between the first and the last crime
Transfer	Transfer from one type of criminal activity to another or from juvenile delinquency to adult criminality
<i>Dynamic Mechanisms</i>	
Activation	Process by which the development of criminal activities is initiated and stimulated
Acceleration	Increase in frequency over time
Diversification	Increase in variety over time
Stabilization	Increase in continuity of criminal activities over time
Aggravation	Process by which the development of criminal activities unfolds in a sequential, potentially orderly manner
Escalation	Increase in seriousness over time; the tendency to move from minor to more serious types of crimes
Developmental sequence	Progression of an individual in the initiation of different types of crimes or different forms of antisocial behavior (e.g., from minor delinquency to substance use, to serious delinquency)
Desistance	Process leading to the cessation of criminal activity, either partially or entirely
Deceleration	Decrease in frequency over time
De-escalation	Decrease in seriousness over time; the tendency to move from more serious to less serious types of crimes
Ceiling	Reaching a plateau or ceiling in the seriousness of criminal activity
Specialization	Decrease in variety over time

Source: Morizot & Kazemian (2015), p. 3.

About the Author

Lila Kazemian, Ph.D., is a professor of criminology at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York. She is a graduate of Université de Montréal in Canada, and she earned her Ph.D. at the University of Cambridge's Institute of Criminology. She has published on the topics of desistance from crime, long-term incarceration, reintegration, life-course and criminal career research, and comparative criminology. Her recent book, *Positive Growth and Redemption in Prison: Finding Light Behind Bars and Beyond*, examines the process of desistance from crime among individuals who were incarcerated for long periods of time. Dr. Kazemian has served as an expert in several legal cases involving housing discrimination against individuals with a criminal record.

