

Desistance from Crime

Empirical Evidence

Implications for Policy and Practice

Roger Przybylski
Founder/Consultant, RKC Group
Research Director, Justice Research and Statistics Association

Colorado Commission on Criminal and Juvenile Justice

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- **Objective**

- Raise awareness regarding the empirical evidence on desistance and its implications for policy and practice

- **What I will cover**

- The concept of desistance and the manner in which desistance typically occurs
- Research-based factors that facilitate desistance
- Key implications for policy and practice

What is Desistance?

- Desistance is the process of abstaining from crime among those who previously had engaged in a sustained pattern of offending
- Research on desistance provides a fundamentally different understanding of what works to reduce crime and victimization
- While desistance was originally viewed as a discrete state of non-offending, we now know that it is fairly unusual for individuals to “quit crime” in the same way they might resign from employment

Empirical Evidence on Desistance

- Desistance is a process, not an event
- Desistance is typically characterized by:
 - Ambivalence and vacillation
 - Progress and set-back
 - Hope and despair
- Hope and support play a key role in the desistance process

Empirical Evidence on Desistance

- Identity transformation is a common dynamic among individuals who successfully desist
- Desistance requires:
 - Motivation
 - Acquisition of new skills (human capital),
 - Relationships that facilitate and help maintain change (social capital)
- Fallacy to view desistance as simply the product of intervention

Understanding Desistance

- Primary desistance refers to a lull or crime-free gap in a criminal career
- Secondary desistance refers to a change in the way that an ex-offender sees him or herself
- Subcomponents of desistance
 - De-escalation
 - Deceleration
 - Reaching a ceiling
 - Specialization

Understanding Desistance

- Multiple theories of desistance
- Developmental theories have the strongest empirical support
- Common themes across desistance theories
 - The prevalence of offending decreases with age
 - The incidence of offending does not necessarily decrease with age, because for some offenders it will increase
 - There is relative continuity within offending
 - Despite patterns of continuity in offending, most offenders do not become career criminals
 - There are multiple pathways out of crime

What Helps Individuals Desist From Crime?

- Desistance is related to both external/social aspects of a person's life as well as to internal/psychological factors
- Informal social controls have a greater and more lasting impact than formal social controls
- **Getting older and maturing**
- **Employment**
- **Family and relationships**
- **Sobriety**

Age and Crime

- Age has a direct effect on crime
- In Laub and Sampson's (2003) longitudinal study of criminal offenders past age 70, their major finding was that the number of offenses committed eventually decreased for **all** groups of offenders
- Both frequency of and participation in offending peaked in early adulthood and declined thereafter
- Street crime in particular is typically a pursuit of the young. For most types of street crime, offending rates peak in the late teens or early 20s, and then decline steadily before dropping off sharply around the age of 30

Employment

- Offenders who find steady employment - particularly if it offers a sense of achievement and satisfaction - are more likely to desist from crime
- Some people, especially in areas of high economic disadvantage can desist without employment, but overall, employment is very important in helping to sustain desistance

Family and Relationships

- Relationships matters
- Forming strong and supportive intimate bonds to others promotes desistance from crime
- **Having a place within a social group.** Those who feel connected to others in a (non-criminal) community of some sort are more likely to stay away from crime. Criminologists call this “social capital” – the amount of social support that someone has “in the bank” to draw upon

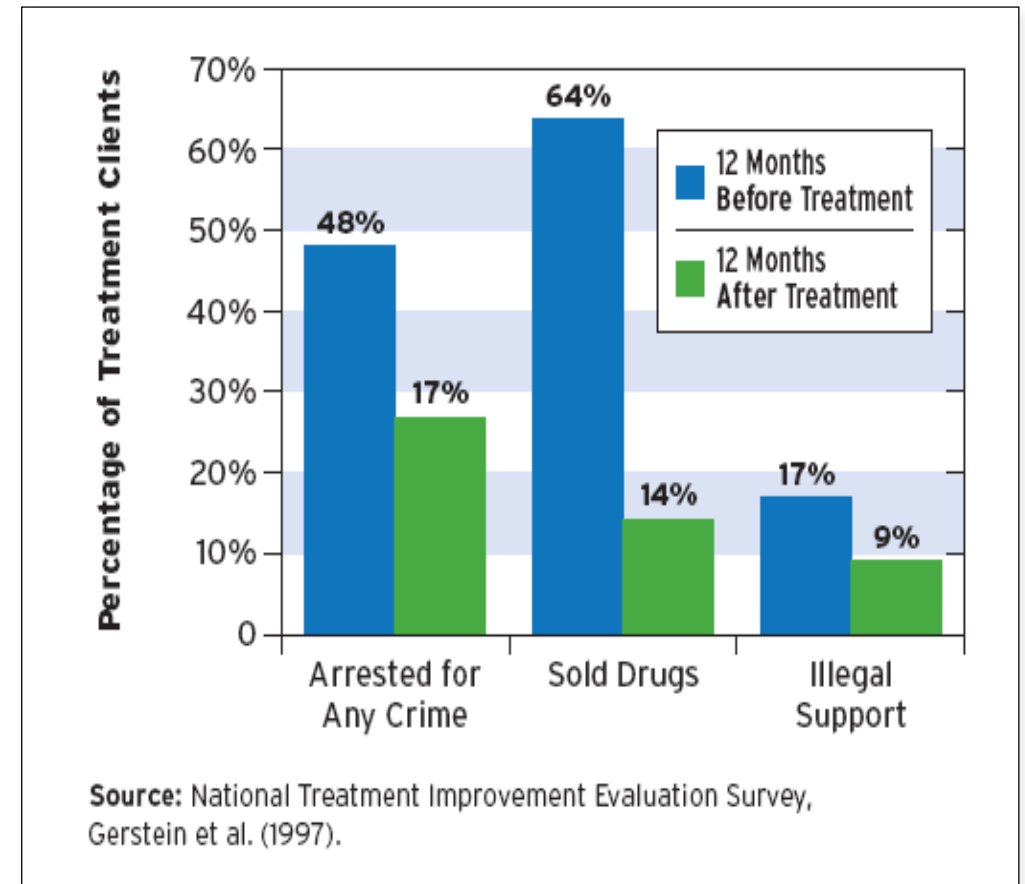
Positive Relationships Between Offenders and Justice System Professionals Matter

- Research on “why people obey the law” suggests that people are most likely to be law abiding when they feel the law is fair and justly administered
- Punishments that are felt to be random, unjust or deliberately intended to demean can trigger defiance and a process of “rejecting one’s rejectors”
- Desistance research has identified similar processes. Desisters who believe the criminal justice system helped them usually think this because of a particular staff member who made a difference, rather than because of any particular intervention

Sobriety

- Drug and alcohol use are strongly associated with offending; therefore, recovery from addiction is a big part of desistance processes
- Treatment is effective, it reduces substance use and crime
- Must recognize that addiction is a chronic, often relapsing brain disease
- Like other chronic diseases, relapse is common; cannot view treatment as a one-time chance

Changes in Criminal Activity
Before vs. After Treatment



Treatment is Not a Slam Dunk

- Time in treatment matters
 - Program completion and longer retention times are associated with better outcomes
- Aftercare is important for long term results
 - Process for linking offenders with appropriate aftercare services is often not well defined
- NIDA's principles for treatment of criminal justice populations
 - Standardized assessment tools, tailored treatment plan, adequate duration, systems integration, drug testing and incentives, continuity of care

Risk and Need as a Quadrant Model (Marlowe, 2009)

		Prognostic Risk	
		High	Low
Criminogenic Need	High	Proximal Goals •Supervision •Treatment Distal Goals •Pro-social habilitation •Adaptive habilitation	Proximal Goals •Treatment Distal Goals •(Pro-social habilitation) •Adaptive habilitation
	Low	Proximal Goals •Supervision •Pro-social habilitation Distal Goals •(Adaptive habilitation)	Proximal Goals •Secondary prevention •Diversion

Criminogenic Needs

Substance Dependence or Addiction

1. Binge pattern
2. Cravings or compulsions
3. Withdrawal symptoms



Abstinence is a distal goal

Substance Abuse



Abstinence is a proximal goal

Collateral needs

- Dual diagnosis
- Chronic medical condition (e.g., HIV+, HCV, diabetes)
- Homelessness, chronic unemployment



Regimen compliance is proximal

National Research Council Report: Parole, Desistance from Crime, and Community Integration

- Work, family ties, reduced consumption of drugs are important factors in desistance
 - People who desist are those who are better integrated into pro-social roles in family, workplace and community
- Time period immediately following release from prison is the riskiest
- Supervision alone does not reduce recidivism; supervision integrated with treatment does
- Sanctions alone have little impact

Agency, Self-Determination

- Maruna (2001) describes the prognosis for many persistent offenders as “dire” (precisely because of the criminogenic backgrounds, environments, and traits that they experience)
- Perhaps because of their experience of adversity, we know from research and practice experience that persistent offenders are very often highly fatalistic; or to use psychological terms, they have “low self-efficacy” and an “external locus of control”
- They don’t feel that they determine the direction of their own lives. Rather, life happens to them. Yet Maruna (2001) discovered that despite this background and previous outlook, desisters somehow manage to acquire a sense of “agency” — of control over their own lives

Programs and Desistance

- Many contemporary correctional interventions have a strong evidence base, and they can be seen as “assisting desistance” by helping to develop the internal mindsets that are important to desistance
- But desistance research also suggests that just delivering an evidence-based program won’t be enough without also paying attention to important external desistance factors
- Desistance is an inherently individualized process; hence, interventions need to be individualized
 - Interventions must work with offenders, not on them
 - The development and maintenance of motivation and hope are key practitioner tasks

Involving Ex-offenders

- Those on the journey to desistance need to hear from someone who has walked in their shoes
- Offenders who find ways to contribute to society, their community, or their families, are more successful at giving up crime
 - For instance, the opportunity to mentor, assist or enhance the life of other people
 - If these achievements are formally recognized, the effect may be even stronger

Going Forward: What We Can Do

- Give strong optimistic messages and avoid labelling
- Focus on strengths not just risks
- Make practical assistance the priority
- Work with parents and partners
- Recognize and mark achievements towards desistance
- Work with and support communities
- Work with, not on offenders

Policy Implications

- The evidence on desistance highlights the need for policymakers to alter current policies on incarceration and the collateral consequences of a felony conviction
- Social control and social capital are derived from some of the most basic institutions that imprisonment harms: the family, school, and job stability. Incarcerating high percentages of offenders already damages their weak bonds to society

Policy Implications

- To surmount the negative effects of prison sentences, offenders should be able to continue their education while in prison and participate in occupational and vocational programs that could improve post-release job stability
- Specifically, programs need to effectively monitor the compliance of ex-prisoners and incorporate treatment focusing on job training and employment, education, family counseling, and reconnecting individuals to the community

Policy Implications

- Invest in communities
 - Transforming Public Safety Model
- Invest in prevention

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Comments Questions?

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Founder/Consultant, RKC Group
Research Director, Justice Research and Statistics Association
email: rprzybylski@jrsa.org