



Understanding Desistance from Crime

This summary explains what we know about how people with criminal records avoid re-offending. It also suggests ways in which NOMS could assist or speed up the process of giving up crime.

What is desistance?

Desistance is the process of abstaining from crime among those who previously had engaged in a sustained pattern of offending.¹ It is fairly unusual for individuals to “quit crime” in the same way they might resign from employment, i.e. making a decision and walking away. This is partly because the stigma of having a criminal record reduces the opportunities for doing something other than crime.² The cycle of crime and punishment can become a repetitive loop that is difficult to escape from. A better metaphor for desisting from crime is quitting smoking or recovering from another addictive behaviour such as gambling or substance use. Desistance from crime will probably involve some false stops and starts, sometimes called “relapses”.³

Over the past decade, criminologists have sought to better understand the dynamics of desistance and identify those factors that appear to support and sustain it.⁴ Additionally, as we have learned to understand desistance better, it has become possible to generate some ideas about “assisted desistance” – how organisations and people can help individuals caught in cycles of crime and punishment successfully move away from lives of crime.⁵

The study of desistance has mainly looked at high volume (“prolific”) offending such as burglary, drug sales, and low-level violence. There has been less study of desistance from more serious crimes such as sexual offending⁶ and organised violence.⁷ Some research suggests that many of the same factors may apply to these sorts of offences too.⁸

What helps individuals desist from crime?

Desistance seems to be related to both external/social aspects of a person’s life (such as the supportiveness of those around them) as well as to internal/psychological factors (such as what they believe in and what they want from life).⁹

Getting older and maturing. Street crime in particular is typically a pursuit of the young. For most types of street crime, British offending rates peak in the late teens or early 20s, and then decline steadily before dropping off sharply around the age of 30.¹⁰ The effect is probably because the ex-offender is giving more attention to his family and relationships – see below.

Family and Relationships. Forming strong and supportive intimate bonds to others appears to help desistance from crime.¹¹ However this is only true when the spouse is not involved in crime and drug use as well. Good relationships are thought to protect against recidivism for a number of reasons. First, they can reduce the amount of time spent in groups of same-age, same-sex friends (a known risk factor for offending).¹² Second, developing strong partnerships and relationships with one’s children also provide an individual with something to lose if there is a return to prison.¹³ Non-offending parents can have the same sort of effect on ex-offenders who have returned to the family home.¹⁴ Finally, family and intimate attachments can give lives a sense of purpose, meaning and direction.¹⁵ Individuals who devote themselves to raising their children¹⁶ or caring for elderly parents¹⁷ will find that crime and imprisonment is incompatible with such roles.

Sobriety. Drug and alcohol use are strongly associated with offending. Therefore, recovery from addiction is a big part of desistance processes. However, the effect is not automatic; some individuals may abstain from addictive substances but not crime, or vice versa.¹⁸

Employment. Offenders who find steady employment - particularly if it offers a sense of achievement, satisfaction or mastery - are more likely to stop offending¹⁹, although this is not always going to be true. White-collar offending is clear evidence that employment alone cannot prevent crime, in the same way that domestic violence is proof that a romantic relationship is not alone a “solution” for crime. Also, some people, especially in areas of high economic disadvantage can desist without employment.²⁰ But overall, employment is very important in helping to sustain desistance, especially for those aged over 27.²¹

Hope and motivation. Considerable research now suggests that individuals who desist from crime usually are very motivated to change their lives and feel confident that they can turn things around. Those offenders who clearly say they want to stop offending are the most likely to desist.²² The impact of these motivational factors can last for up to ten years after release from prison.²³

Something to give. People who feel and show concern and empathy for others are more likely to desist from crime²⁴. Offenders who find ways to contribute to society, their community, or their families, appear to be more successful at giving up crime.²⁵ For instance, the opportunity to mentor, assist or enhance the life of other people. If these achievements are formally recognised, the effect may be even stronger.²⁶

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. Social networks that help desistance include extended family, mutual aid associations, clubs, and cultural or religious groups.²⁷

Not having a criminal identity.²⁸ People with criminal records who do not define themselves purely as “offenders” but see themselves as basically good people who made a mistake may find it easier to desist. For instance, Shadd Maruna found that persistent offenders saw themselves as “doomed to deviance” whereas desisters believed that their past offending was “not the real me”.²⁹

Being believed in. It is notable that many desisters talk about the powerful effect of having someone believe in them.³⁰ Many offenders are strongly encouraged by someone else believing that they can and will change, that they are good people, and that they have something to offer society or other people.³¹

Accredited programmes and desistance

Until recently, desistance research has been more interested in how offenders give up crime in their own way, rather than how interventions can help them give up. Desistance research has not, therefore, given much attention to the role of programmes, but few desisters say that programmes were part of what helped them give up offending.³²

However, many modern correctional interventions have a strong evidence base³³, and they could be seen as “assisting desistance” by helping to develop the internal mindsets that are important to desistance.³⁴ It has also been said that programmes can help desistance by offering a “blueprint” for change.³⁵ Some programmes focus on relationship skills which may help people form stronger social and intimate relationships. As well, desistance research has pointed to the importance of therapeutic relationships with treatment providers as helping desistance³⁶. But the desistance research suggests that just doing a programme won’t be enough without also paying attention to the important external desistance factors.

What can NOMS do?

In the Sheffield Desistance Study, most offenders reported feeling they got little support from the probation service in their attempts to desist from crime. Most of the offenders in this study described their contact with the probation service as merely “reporting to the probation office” and said their interactions with their probation officer were only about very general matters. The majority of offenders had not found that their relationship with their probation officer had been of use to them in desisting. The researchers recommended that the probation service should consider ways of making the supervisory relationship more meaningful and useful.³⁷

Below are some suggestions for doing so that emerge from the desistance literature.

Focus on strong and meaningful relationships.

Research on “why people obey the law” suggests that people are most likely to respond to punishment when they feel they have been treated fairly.³⁸ Punishments that are felt to be random, unjust or deliberately intended to demean can trigger defiance and a process of “rejecting one’s rejectors”.³⁹ Desistance research has identified similar processes.⁴⁰ 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 they attended. Sue Rex, for instance, found that probationers in her research were most likely to credit their probation officer for helping them desist from offending when the officer was seen as being committed, fair, and encouraging; and the relationship was seen as active and participatory.⁴¹

Give strong optimistic messages & avoid labelling

The messages that criminal justice staff give to those they supervise, through what they imply as well as what they say directly, have a strong impact. Criminal justice staff need to “mind their language” and their underlying attitudes, and should work to communicate strong optimistic messages about the potential for desistance.⁴²

Focus on strengths not just risks. Much work with offenders focuses on identifying and targeting risk factors – factors that increase the likelihood of reoffending. Often, less attention is paid to identifying and building personal strengths. Offenders find this bias to be de-motivating.⁴³ Therefore, focusing on strengths rather than over-emphasising risks is probably a better way to help someone desist. Staff who have low expectations of offenders can create self-fulfilling prophecies which encourage recidivism. Staff who have high expectations of others are more likely to increase determined attempts to change (sometimes called a “Pygmalion effect”).⁴⁴

Recognise and mark achievements towards desistance. NOMS should try to find ways to formally mark and reward progress. The end of a prison or probation sentence, for instance, is a significant event, and the way in which this is

managed could make the difference between desistance and reoffending.⁴⁵

Make practical assistance the priority. In desistance research, probationers and prisoners say they value practical support more than any other type of intervention. Those with criminal convictions therefore need practical help as well as psychological support: “Hope, expectation and confidence fade quickly on an empty stomach”.⁴⁶

Work with parents and partners. Given the evidence of the central role played in supporting desistance by parents and partners, prison and probation staff should consider all ways possible to support and maintain these crucial relationships.⁴⁷

Work with and support communities. Individuals who feel like they are a welcomed part of society are less likely to offend than those who feel stigmatised.⁴⁸ The voluntary sector, faith-based and other community groups, and local employers, are all key components in reintegration. Their influence can last far beyond the criminal justice agencies. Interventions and training can build a better capacity to achieve a non-criminal lifestyle, but only communities can provide the opportunities to turn this learning into action. Without community reintegration, the only place where an offender can find a warm welcome and social acceptance will be the criminal community.⁴⁹

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