



INSTITUTE OF RESTORATIVE JUSTICE AND PENAL REFORM

Why they desist: understanding the life worlds of young people involved in crime

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In collaboration with



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Executive Summary

This study was made possible by a Research and Development Grant from Lotterywest. The aim of the project was to explore the experiences, interpretations and perceptions of young people with a history of crime who are attempting to move away from criminal activity. The project was designed to provide an avenue that allowed for the voices, stories and interpretations of these young people with a history of offending in a bid to explore some of the ways they negotiate their move away from crime. The study has sought to use these insights in order to identify potential pathways out of crime.

The research shows that, although these young people's experiences around crime are varied, they share common ideas in regards to changing their behaviour. In this study, the participants have identified some of the factors that make it difficult to achieve change. Their stories also highlight the complexities associated with connecting to other members of the broader community who have not had a criminal history.

In the body of the report the following issues are highlighted and discussed:

- The contextual factors that impact on young people's decisions regarding desistance from crime
- The imperative of personal decision-making processes
- The importance of patterns and vulnerabilities around the "triggers" to re-offend
- Identification of the strategies and motivators that maintain changes
- Youth perceptions of support and intervention services

The report also makes the following recommendations:

- To maintain the current system of cautions for young people under 18 years of age
- Provide the means by which the views of young people can be integrated into intervention strategies, thus encouraging young people to develop their own views and decisions regarding their lives
- In intervention programs, to make a clear distinction between forms of support and punitive measures regarding attendance
- To engender rewards and rituals for success in intervention programs
- To explore further the manner in which social, cultural and political practices block pro-social connections to members of the community

Overall, this project has identified that young people who have a history of engaging in criminal activity recognise that an integral aspect of changing their lives requires a

committed decision on their part. However, while recognising that a personal decision is integral to positive change, this decision feeds into wider social, cultural and political factors. These factors include addressing substance misuse; recognising and challenging blockages that close down the possibility for young people to develop supportive relationships with others; providing access to appropriate housing and support services; and ensuring that young people are provided with significant opportunities for change.

Preamble

This study seeks to gather insights into the ways in which young people with a conviction history make the decision to either re-offend or to move away from criminal activity. A major aim of the study is to utilise the views and perceptions of young people who have participated in 'offending' in order to get some "first hand" ideas about why, and how young people "desist" from offending.

Youth crime and offending can impact on the young person's life and their relationship with their family, and it can have serious effects on victims of crime. This study acknowledges that youth offending substantially impacts on the community in terms of financial expense, as well as in a certain 'loss' of trust and safety for community members. This project also acknowledges that within Western Australia there is currently a range of approaches, programs and models aimed at assisting young people to move away from offending¹. However, the approach developed for this research was aimed specifically at listening to those young people who have a history of offending, but who have articulated a desire to change their behaviour. In so doing, the project aims to explore how each person makes this decision and, more importantly, what strategies each person develops to maintain a "crime-free" existence.

The overarching theme of the project is to identify ways in which offending by young people can be reduced. The study therefore responds to policy situated around the Prisons Act 1982; Children's Court of WA Act 1988, Young Offenders Act 1994; Young Offenders Regulations 1995; Sentencing Act 1995; Young Offenders Amendment Act 2004; Prisons and Sentencing Legislation Amendment Act 2006 and other related policy domains.

For the purpose of this research "young people" are defined as being between 14-24 years of age. While much literature includes young people aged 12-14 years, this study limited the participant group to those fourteen years or older due to the requirements of the Murdoch University's Human Research Ethics Committee. The study works from the premise that the category "young people" is problematic, because the distinction of such a group of people has multiple meanings that occupy both ends of a descriptive spectrum (White and Wyn 2004).

¹ See for example, Police Cautioning (1991); intensive supervision programs, electronic monitoring and curfews, community juvenile conferencing and mentoring programs.
www.correctiveservices.wa.gov.au

The study was conducted in the Perth metropolitan area. It relied on the commitment of a group of dedicated people working in the area of 'Youth' who assisted the research partners in gaining contact with various young people who had been involved in criminal activity.

Introduction

The study of desistance from crime has proved to be useful for understanding the circumstances that surround the move away from criminal activity². On a theoretical level, "desistance" appears to be understood as the cessation or termination of criminal behaviour. For researchers, however, the concept of desistance as a formal tool for understanding how and why people stop offending is not absolutely clear. On the one hand, desistance can simply refer to a person who commits an offence once and has no further episodes of criminal activity. On the other, desistance can refer to the duration of time in between criminal activity. Farrington (1986) suggests that any understanding of "desisting" in terms of "termination" is problematic as even a five or ten year crime-free period is no guarantee that offending has terminated.

Desisting from criminal activity is an unusual concept to grasp as it is concerned with capturing the circumstances and characteristics that involve a sustained absence of an event (Maruna 2001). In terms of research, analysing an "absence" poses a range of problems and complexities, specifically when asking people to explain how and why they stop doing something. For people with a conviction history (or those who have engaged in crime without a conviction) proving an absence of behaviour is far more difficult than establishing oneself as a criminal. Lofland (1969: 210) notes that, even after long years of "crime-free" behaviour, removing the stigma of being an "offender" may never occur.

This study takes the approach that desistance from crime is a process, or a gradual move away from criminal activity. Bushway et al. (2003: 133) explain this as a reduction of criminal activity in relation to the original levels and types of offending. This interpretation emphasises that transitions and changes are required on many levels for a person to live a crime-free existence. It highlights that an initial decision to stop offending requires particular forms of support and, importantly, maintaining the decision over time requires different forms of support and assistance. In the context of the latter, maintaining the decision *not* to engage in criminal activity involves changes at the "me" level. In other words, desisting from crime involves a continual process of redeveloping oneself.

This project is located in the space where young people attempt to articulate how they begin and how they maintain this process of change. While much research has identified factors that can assist young people to move away from crime,³ this project is interested

² See for example, Bushway et al. 2003; Giordano et al. 2002; Maruna et al. 2004; Shover 1996.

³ See for example, Moffit 1997; Nagin & Tremblay 1999; Sampson and Laub 2005 and Thornberry 2005.

in exploring the factors pertinent to young people who have been engaged in crime and how they had managed (or not) to change into a person who “does not do crime”. The aim of exploring these perspectives is to gain some understanding of the individual, environmental and social factors that lead to “not doing crime”, and thus identify potential strategies that may assist young people out of offending behaviour.

It is important to note the language that young people adopt in relation to descriptors such as “crime”, “offending”, “at risk”, and “repeat offenders” as these appear to have different meanings from those within the dominant structures. For example, “crime” is broken down into “doing” and “not doing crime”; “big or small crime”. “Doing crime” only refers to the act of *doing* something; it does not include being caught. “Offending” refers to being caught by the authorities, this resulting in either being “cautioned” or receiving some form of sentence. For some young people being understood as “at risk” is good. It suggests their life is full of risk-taking and excitement. For those interviewed in this study the use of categories such as “persistence” and “desistance” was irrelevant. In fact, only one participant had heard of the word ‘persisting’ and none had heard of “desisting” as a way of talking about not doing crime.

A further important note in terms of language around crime and young people is the adoption of the category “pathways” commonly referred as “pathways into and out of crime”. Certainly all of the young people interviewed had an idea of the term “pathways”, and what it referred to in terms of legal and support programs. For example, some of the cohort stated, “My pathway into crime was ...” or, with a sense of humour, “I can’t find the pathway out yet ...”. However, many of the participants commented that what he or she wanted was a “pathway” to somewhere or something. As one young participant commented:

I have been on a pathway going nowhere, gaol, death or brain fucked, they're pathways to nowhere; I want a pathway to somewhere better than that.

(Male, aged 17)

The significance of grasping the language of the young people who are attempting to move away from “doing crime” is imperative. It is in the interplay between language, social context and culture that young people construct and reconstruct themselves, their identities, their relationships with others and how they interpret their actions. Self identity is not a pre-given category ... but something that is routinely created and sustained in reflexive activities of the individual (Giddens 1991: 52). The choices and decisions that young people take are developed *within* the social context in which each operates.

For most of the young people in this study, engaging in crime offered a form of escape from the ordinary everydayness of life. Life invariably was viewed as “boring” or as offering little possibility for anything “good” to happen. For some, money was the primary motivator – money for drugs, alcohol or food – especially if the young person was living on the streets. For those who do live on the streets “doing crime” is a necessary part of survival; it can involve stealing, shoplifting, breaking into cars, joyrides, “mobbing people”⁴. It is not viewed as “big crime” but part of the enculturation of living with others on the streets, and it is required for the basic necessities of life – shelter and food. For these young people, this is the “normal” way of doing things, it informs who they are and how each negotiates his or her everyday existence.

For the young people who have been doing crime but live with family or friends, the doing of crime was an integral part of their social world. For the majority of the participants doing crime was always about doing crime with others. It provided a bond with friends and, for most, was described as “fun” to be involved in the drama of crime. This was especially the case for the group of 14-17 year olds. These young people spoke about the “deep” connections that had developed between friends due to their “doing crime together”. While this criminal activity was not essential to providing life’s basics, it did appear to provide an interruption to the repetition of daily existence.

This project is based on the premise that young people who have engaged in crime can provide insight into what is required to “stop” doing crime. The report proceeds in six sections. Section One will introduce the participants and the research methodology. Section Two will identify the contextual factors that prompted the participants to think about “desisting” from crime. Section Three will discuss stages of the desistance process in terms of decisions and vulnerabilities. Section Four will outline strategies and motivations that help maintain a life away from doing crime. Section Five provides an overview of the participants’ perceptions of intervention and support services, and in the final section, the report will raise some recommendations, situating these in relation to current policy directions for young people and crime.

⁴ Mobbing refers to a group of young people surrounding a person on the street and stealing their belongings or harassing them until the person gives up their money. (Interview data)

Section One: Participants and Methods

Participants

The interview cohort consisted of twenty five people aged between 14-24 years. This was broken into two age categories: 14-17 years old (15 interviews); and 18-24 years old (10 interviews). Of these, 8 were female and 17 males. An important point in the make-up of this cohort also refers to ethnicity. Indigenous Australians make up the highest proportion of young people in detention in Western Australia⁵. However, the split between Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants in this study does not replicate this proportion, with only three of the twenty five people interviewed identifying themselves as Indigenous. Although youth crime is a significant issue with Indigenous young people recruiting young Indigenous people for this study was a difficult task. A variety of strategies was employed to include a reasonable cohort, but the project was not successful in including more views from Indigenous young people. This project would recommend undertaking further research into “doing crime” and “not doing crime” with young Indigenous people, utilizing a more in-depth and specialised methodology.

The criteria for selecting participants included: age, gender, history of criminal activity, and an articulation that he or she wanted to change their life. Articulating this “want” was indicated in terms of attending youth centres, discussing aims and needs with centre staff, enrolling in new courses of study, participating in programs in support agencies, and through responding to flyers requesting people tell their story of change. The sample was drawn from providers of services for “at risk” youth. A snowballing technique was also employed in order to network within hard-to-reach groups.

The conviction types for the participant group ranged from one-off juvenile cautions, juvenile detention, community service to imprisonment. The types of offences included shoplifting, graffiti, car theft, joyriding, assault, a variety of drug-related offences, breaking and entering, fraud, prostitution and armed robbery.

The interviews were conducted in a range of locations in the metropolitan area, with some interviews being undertaken in the outer metropolitan area. Interviews were conducted in cafes, hostels, community halls, offices, drop-in centres, youth activity centres, PCYCs and private residences. Interviews ranged in length from 30 minutes to over one hour. Each participant was informed about the project, and told that their

⁵ Indigenous young people constitute 69.4% of the total juvenile custodial population and 43.1% of the overall adult prisoner population. Weekly Offender Statistics (Aug 07). www.correctiveservices.wa.gov.au.

responses would be confidential and that their informed consent was required. For participants under eighteen years of age, guardians or parents completed the consent form. The participant was also informed that he or she could cease the interview at any time. Each interview was recorded and transcribed. The interview questions fielded information about how the person had become involved in crime; if he or she was still doing crime; why the person had started to move away from crime; and their views regarding police, the court system, involvement with community programs, and the role of parents, family and friends. (See Appendix 1 for interview prompts and Appendix 2 for consent forms)

Methods

This project employs a qualitative framework in order to foreground how each person has rendered their life meaningful (Katz 1988; Moustakas 1994). Significant insights into the complexities involved in personal transformation can be gained by exploring the ways in which young people construct and reconstruct their self image. Moreover, this approach enables an exploration of the strategies each person develops to create meaning in their lives, and the way in which each person reacts to, and interprets, their environment. This highlights why some individuals, exposed to the same environment or demonstrating similar psychological characteristics, respond to doing crime and not doing crime in different ways.

The research design for this study focused on one-off interviews. The interviews were semi structured in format, thus allowing an in-depth exploration of the participant's experiences and the drawing out of sensitive details (Johnson 2000). This approach was delivered in a flexible and responsive way so as best to capture the participant's experiences and interpretations. The sequence of questions varied depending on the participant's responses and their chosen direction for the interview, thus replicating a conversational format (Bryman 2004).

The interview data was analysed using a thematic approach. This generated broad themes, but with specific focus on the following: decision-making processes; internal and external triggers of re-offending; strategies and motivators to stay away from crime; and the participants' perceptions of support services. The process of creating categories and assigning them to selected data acknowledges that capturing the experience and meaning of others necessarily involves interpretation (Darlington and Scott 2002; Atkinson and Delemont 2005; Stringer and Dwyer 2005). The themes derived from this analysis are therefore an interpretation of the participants' narratives and, as such, do not propose to provide a neutral or "objective" position.

Section Two: Thoughts, Questions and Problems

Why stop offending?

Robbie's Story

Robbie left home at fifteen for reasons she explained as personal and difficult to discuss. Robbie described her home life as being dysfunctional with constant physical battles with her parents, and once she left home, doing crime became part of living on the streets. For Robbie, this provided connection to others and was necessary for her survival. Now eighteen, Robbie is attempting to change her life. Robbie explained:

Desperate times call for desperate measures; we held up service stations and stole food from supermarkets. Trying to get money when you don't have anywhere to stay is really hard; social workers and that, they want to help you but you have to live like they say and I didn't want anyone telling me what to do or how to live my life. I got into all kinds of drugs and it was fun ... I did get my life together and moved up north with my boyfriend. You know, we had jobs and a car and we were clean. It was good. We had a dog and felt like normal people. But we came back here to help a friend who was going down and we got back into the same stuff again and now my boyfriend's in gaol. I was living on the streets for a while again, but now I'm sharing a house with friends; I still do some drugs but not so many and I'm not doing big crime anymore, only little bits like smoking weed and stuff. I don't need to do that anymore ... I have started a study course you do at home ... it costs a lot but I tried doing it at ... but I knew too many people and I just got caught up in the same old thing ... it's better doing it on my own 'cause it's my decision and I can go at my pace ... I know if I finish I can work with other kids like me and I can help them get away from this life ...

Current research in youth crime has highlighted many reasons why young people move away from crime and, conversely, why others remain "persisters" and the young people in this study confirmed many of these points⁶. These current findings suggest that their interpretations add contextual detail that can assist with strategies aimed at reducing and supporting young offenders through stages of transition. Burnett (1992: 181) argues that grasping knowledge of offenders' construction of their situation is essential to a more significant understanding of why there are different incidences of re-offending in apparently similar circumstances.

⁶ See for example, Bushway et al. 2003; Gottredson & Hirschi 1990; Matsueda & Hiemer 1997 for ontogenic factors; and Laub et al. 1998; Farrington & West 1993; Rand 1997 for sociogenic factors.

Contextual factors

In probing these young people about why they start to move away from doing crime a confounding problem regarding personal transformation is raised. The explanations offered why *not* to do crime also relate to the reasons that many of these young people provided for their initial involvement in crime. For the participants in this study, three contextual factors impacted on their decisions regarding desisting from crime: stress-related thoughts; an increased sense of fear, and their connections with others. These same factors, however, also impacted in various ways on their initial pathways into crime. Family relations, stress associated with school, peers and work; fear and hopelessness that nothing would change; and connections with significant others all played an important role in their initial forays into criminal activity. This suggests that there are degrees of intensity that need to be taken into account when considering why people start to move away from crime. Intensity can be the driver that pushes people to engage in crime; equally, intensity is pertinent to steering one's life away from crime. This indicates that the types of supports that aim to assist young people to make responsible decisions about not doing crime need to be mindful of these levels of intensity.

Stress-related thoughts

Participants spoke of an increasing feeling of stress as a starting point to them thinking about changing their lives. Stress was indicated in feelings about being anxious which, for many of the participants, manifested in both physiological and psychological symptoms. The physiological symptoms included weight reduction and a loss of appetite. Skin conditions and prolonged respiratory infections were also noted as symptoms of stress. One young participant had recently been in hospital due to a chronic bone infection from a small cut on her finger. When asked to explain why she thought that stress had played a part in move away from crime she commented:

I had been doing lots of crime and taking drugs and I kept getting sick. When I cut my finger I didn't think anything of it but it didn't get better. Then I got really sick and had to go to hospital ... It's funny 'cause they gave me more drugs ... it was when I was in there that I started thinking I could die ...

Problematic substance use is another factor that the participants identified as a symptom of stress-related thinking. Most of the participants identified that they had had substance use problems that involved alcohol and amphetamines. Both drinking and drug-taking are relatively easy to access and provided connections to others, and most of

the participants commented that alcohol and drugs made them feel good and allowed them to have a good time.

I can't go a weekend without getting drunk; I get seriously drunk; I don't smoke weed or other stuff, but I really like to get wasted ...
(Male, 15 years)

I spend all my money on drugs and alcohol ... It's about getting wasted, you know ... it makes me feel, you know ... fucking great ...
(Male, 18 years)

My friends and I sneak out and get wasted on alcohol ... I just climb out the window and meet my friend ... getting wasted makes you feel better ...
(Female, 15 years)

When life is really boring crap, getting wasted is a way out ...
(Male, 17 years)

Participants identified that problematic substance use impacted on their decision to engage in crime, especially if they had been drinking or taking drugs with friends. The participants in the age group 14-17 years identified that they had some concerns about their substance use with anxiety regarding loss of memory when "wasted" being an area of primary concern. Of the fifteen people in this category, half mentioned that drinking and substance use impacted on their lives.

When you're out and really wasted people can do anything to you ... there's people out there who don't care ... you know, they're wasted on whatever ... and it's really scary
(Females, 15 and 16 years)

I really like drinking and getting wasted but I have been thinking it's such a waste ... all my money goes on it and I'd like to have some other stuff and do some other things ... you know, like a car and CDs ...
(Male, 14 years)

The psychological indicators of stress identified by the participants pointed to increasing episodes of panic and overwhelming feelings of hopelessness. In relation to episodes of panic, several younger participants commented that they had experienced panic attacks and feelings of being alone or not really connected to others. On the one hand, the participants identified that feelings of panic could be the effects of substance use. However, several participants commented that panic attacks also occurred when they were not affected by substances. These episodes had caused serious concern for the participants involved as they indicated, for them, that, "*you are brain fucked or drug-fucked and I don't want to end up like that*" (Female, 21 years; Male 17 years).⁷

⁷ On the issue of substance misuse and desistance from crime see, Bachman et al. 1997; Hussong et al. 2004; Moffit 1993.

Feelings of overwhelming hopelessness did appear to lock some of the participants into a cycle that was out of their control. Two participants with a long history of juvenile detention and adult charges clearly identified that their life was a cycle of doing crime, being caught, serving time, then doing more crime. The stories of these two participants, one male and one female, highlight the complexities involved in wanting to change their lives and the sense of hopelessness they felt at being unable to effect that change.

Jason's Story

Jason is eighteen years old and has been in and out of detention since he was fourteen. He is currently living on the streets; he has to attend court soon on an assault charge and he is sure he will be found guilty as he has had similar charges before. He commented that this time he will go to gaol. He explains his family made him leave home because of his drug taking and violence. He has served time for armed robbery, assault and theft. Jason explains:

Sometimes it's fun to do crime. It's fun to have money. It's not about having a hard life, that's just being a sook ... I just made bad choices and I will live with them ... you know ... I'm a criminal, it's the job of the coppers to get me and it's my job not to get caught. I don't have any hope that things will change ... I don't know how to live any other way ...

Amanda's Story

Amanda came to Perth to live with her grandparents when she was fourteen. She explained that both her parents have drug problems and have spent time in prison. Amanda said she started doing crime to get some money and she then became involved in prostitution. She has worked as a street prostitute for four years; Amanda acknowledges she has some drug addiction problems. She also commented that she is in a relationship involving domestic violence, and she is currently facing fraud charges. Amanda explains:

I've been doing crime since I was thirteen, my mum and dad do crime; it's what I know; it's not about being hard, it's fun and ... that's just me, chasing drug dealers, bikies ... it gives me energy. I would like to be different but I just get into that life ... I need the cash ...

Hopelessness is attached to watching friends die from drug-taking, constantly being exposed to violence and threats of violence, attempting to make changes but reverting to

known behaviours and being treated by others as “dropkicks”, “delinquents with no brain” or as “dogs”. For other participants, hopelessness sparked their motivation to change. Two further participants identified that attempting to change their lives was difficult and complex, but the very fact that they were still alive suggested that there was hope for a different life.

When you see your best mate get stomped on and die, or watch someone shoot your friend in the head; my life was on a bus going straight to gaol or dead ... it makes you stop and think ...

(Male, 17 years)

It's all about excitement ... you get a rush just doing the crime, you know; you have to be really controlled because there's people here with guns and others off their heads ... you can make a lot of money but, you know ... you end up getting shot ...

(Male, 22 years)

These responses to stress and feelings of hopelessness indicate that levels of intensity play a significant role in people's choices about doing, or not doing, crime. The implications drawn from this suggest that intervention, support and assistance need to be tailored for the person concerned. In other words, different types of programs need to be structured; one for those who respond to stress by becoming further enmeshed in crime; and another for those who respond to stress by attempting to move away from doing crime.

Increasing sense of fear

Fear is another factor that impacts on people's decision to stop doing crime. As previously discussed, fear is associated with the possibility of death or incapacitation. It is also associated with growing violence between gangs, both in the inner city and in particular suburban areas. Areas specifically noted include Rockingham, Clarkson, Mirrabooka, Joondalup, Warwick, Midland, Armadale and Gosnells. Violence, according to the participants, is frequent around train stations and shopping complexes. Triggers include access to money and racial tensions, and in some cases, relationship stress can cause violence. For example, several of the young women commented that their relationships could go “bad” if there was no access to drugs, and this could cause erratic behaviour to erupt at any point in time.

Fear is also associated with being convicted of a crime and being sentenced to detention.⁸ In the 14-17 year age group, fear of juvenile detention was significant for those who had received cautions or community service hours. The prospect of detention

⁸ See also Liebrich 1993 on the issue of fear in relation to detention.

for this group is significant enough to provoke thoughts about not doing crime. The majority of the interviewees commented that they did not want to go to detention because, "*Detention doesn't work ... you just learn how to do bigger crime. Lots of guys I know who go to Rangeview for stealing cars ... come out and start doing burgs and other stuff*" (Male, aged 17). Moreover, those who had spent time in detention commented that it was, "*hard, and the staff treat you like scu*". For those who had been in a detention facility the thought of going back did cause enough concern to make them stop and think.

Nonetheless, when probed in relation to thinking about not doing crime, all of the people in the 14-17 age group agreed that you could, "*get away with doing small crime but you have to be smart if you are on your second caution*". On this point, however, the seventeen year olds were more fearful than the younger participants of being convicted and being sent to adult prison. The thought of detention was significant for this group, yet the extent to which the threat of detention acts as a formal motivator to desist from crime was unclear. The majority of this young group clearly identified that being in detention was "bad". When asked if the idea of detention would prompt the person not to commit a criminal act, all of the participants said it would *not*.

Fear of detention was more pronounced in the 18-24 year age group and, importantly, this group noted that if you were convicted of "big crime" the likelihood was that you would go to gaol. Fear in this context, appeared differ between males and females.⁹ Not one of the women in the study had served time in adult prison. One participant was waiting for a court appearance and felt she may serve some prison time. Fear of going to gaol for these young women was significant in terms of being separated from their children; placing strain on their relationship; and fear of how being "locked up" might impact on their mental wellbeing. However, the extent to which this fear acts as a motivator to desist from crime again was unclear. All of the women participants commented that they wanted to stop doing crime and each one is working on changing her life, yet they were all still engaged in some form of criminal activity (such as drug-taking, stealing, prostitution and fraud). Each commented that the threat of a prison sentence in and of itself was not enough to maintain their decision not to do crime.¹⁰

*When you're doing crime you don't think about going to gaol ...
I only think about getting quick money ... it's quick and easy*
(Female, 21 years)

⁹ Uggen and Kruttschnitt (1998) analyse the different approaches to desistance from crime for men and women.

¹⁰ See also Ashworth 2003; Burnett and Maruna 1994; Chui et al. 2003 on the issues around sentencing and crime-free behaviour.

I don't think about getting caught ... if the opportunity is there I will do it ... steal, do fraud ... I just don't think about going to gaol ... I can't imagine what that would be like to lose my freedom ...

(Female, aged 18)

Fear around detention for young men centred on levels of violence, sexual assault and possible mental health issues.¹¹ Two participants in the study had spent time in prison. Both participants spoke about the time as troubling and degrading. One participant identified that the prison *"experience"* had seriously impacted on his behaviour such that he now found it difficult to form friendships and meet new people. He expressed that that he had been *"attacked"* in prison and this had made him feel *"dirty and fearful"*. He said that since his release from prison he continued to engage in drug use and other minor criminal offences such as shoplifting. The second participant also identified that he was still doing some crime, (mainly drug-taking) and, while he would like to change his life, he indicated that small amounts of drug-taking would not incur the same penalties.

For those young men who had not spent time in prison, the fear of detention acted as a motivator to *"not get caught"* rather than to desist from crime. Of the male participant group aged 18-24, half (5) were facing court appearances with the possibility of a prison sentence. Most felt they would be given suspended sentences seeing as they did not have any previous convictions and each could provide evidence of attempting to change his life. Further questioning revealed, however, that the idea of going to prison was not enough to stop this group of young men engaging in crime.

Connections to others

A further reason the participant group identified for wanting to stop doing crime related to their connections to others. This was indicated with reference to several types of relationships. Primarily, for the 14-17 years age group, one third (5) of the participants commented that their actions had impacted on their parents' health, wellbeing and mental states, and that this realization had prompted them to think about their actions. One young man spoke about actually watching his father become unwell. He explained that his father had become more, *"sick and thin because he is worried I will end up like my brother, a crim in gaol"*. A further two young women also spoke about how their initial forays into crime were prompted by family stress, each identifying that the impact of their behaviour on their parents had made them stop and think about what they were doing.

¹¹ See Graham and Bowling 1995 and Hughes 1998 on fear of prison as a deterrent from criminal activity.

The older group of participants, the 18-24 year olds, spoke about connections to parents and partners as a prompter to think about their actions.¹² For the women in this group, their relationships with their parents were strained, with two participants having no formal contact with either parent. The one participant who did have contact with her parents explained that both her parents had long histories of substance use and had served prison sentences. For this participant the relationship revolved around caring for her parents and younger siblings, and trying not to repeat her parents' lifestyle, (although, by her own admission, she often failed).

In terms of partners, all of the women spoke about the positive and negative impacts their relationships had on the doing, and not doing, of crime. On the one hand, these women were involved in relationships with others who also engaged in crime and, for the most part, they would do crime together. On the other hand, all the partners had served prison sentences and the women did not want to follow in their partners' footsteps. On this point, these three women spoke about the difficulties involved in attempting to extricate themselves from these worlds. Each commented that doing crime was the world they knew; they know that another world existed, but it appeared elusive. As one commented, *"I can see that world where you have a family and do things together, but I don't know people in that world, I don't know how to get into that world"*.

For these participants, feelings of disconnection to the larger community further impacted on their decisions about doing crime. It is known that such feelings can lead to a sense of social exclusion and reinforce a sense of hopelessness (Greenhaigh et al. 2004; May et al. 2005). For these women, the feeling of being connected to people who they can trust and who trust them is imperative to their commitment to move away from crime. Trust, for these women, could provide a dual pathway out of crime. Trust plays an important role in developing social networks and attachments to others (Bruhn 2005) and, as such, is a necessary component in changing one's life.

Two participants in this study have children. Both identified that thinking about not doing crime was reinforced due to their family connections. However, these participants also identified that they were still doing some crime. The female participant identified that her partner also engaged in crime. The male participant revealed that his partner had left him due to his criminal activity and, while he was deeply connected to his children, at the moment of deciding whether to engage in a crime or not, he invariably chose the former. This participant identified, however, that he was not doing the *"big stuff ... like burgs or drug dealing ... only doing some drug taking and a bit of stealing to have money to buy drugs"*. The woman spoke about her strong connection to her children, both of whom are

¹² In this area see Farrington and West 1993; Giordano et al. 2002; Popenoe 1996

in foster care due to her criminal activity. This woman said that she visited her children twice weekly, and was undertaking drug referral and study programs in a bid to change her life and have her children returned. When probed, however, she added that she was engaging in *"small crime, some smoking weed and stealing but this was to help her with money and stress because they took the kids away"*.

A further form of connection that prompted the male participant group to think about not doing crime was girlfriends. Three of the male participants in the 18-24 years age group have relationships with women, while one, as previously discussed, is separated from his partner and family. Relationships are particularly significant for these young men, with all the male participants commenting that they want a committed relationship and the possibility of having a family. The two participants, who at the time of the interview, were in committed relationship (three months and one year respectively) commented that their partners had suggested *"going away ... up north where there's plenty of work"* in order to change their lives. Both male participants accepted this as a good idea and were planning to go as soon as possible. According to the male participants, their partners did not work and they also engaged in substance use. However, both were very positive about the prospects of going away with their partners and the positive impact this could have on their lives. Their hope was that by removing themselves from a particular "crime-friendly" environment, their decision not do crime would be easier to stick to.

Section Three: Decisions and Vulnerabilities

Attitudinal changes to life

Ryans's Story

Ryan is twenty one years old with a history of drug taking, dealing, car theft and assault. He explained that he became involved with doing crime through his drug taking. His main drug of choice was ICE and he admitted to his involvement with crime for around 5 years. During this time he also managed to complete a trade and, up until one year ago, he maintained consistent employment. He has not spent any time in juvenile detention or adult prison but is currently waiting on a court date for car theft. Ryan commented that he has a supportive relationship with his parents and he is hoping his current attempt at rehabilitation will help change his life. He has a girlfriend and, depending on his upcoming court appearance, is planning to go north for work when he completes his rehabilitation. Ryan's description of his life involved with ICE, car theft and drug dealing provides a glimpse into the complexities around changing one's attitude to life.

I've been stealing cars, ripping off drug dealers and doing ICE for years. We'd do a lot of robbing – that's where we'd go around and get a bit of stuff and see what they had and then we'd go back with more mates an hour later ... smash up the place, take the drugs and the money ... we could do it every night ... it's the thing about ICE, it taps you in the head ... it grabs you by the balls and sticks its fist right through you ... once it's grabbed you, you don't want it to end... you can't just have one because you get hungry for it ... after four or five hours you need more. You do anything for it.

Dealing, you know ... it's like that ... it's too easy to get it, big wads of money ... people in this business are smart ... someone asked me to do his driving ... it's worth millions but I'd be the one with the gun and I could get shot ... people on ICE go mad ... you don't know what they will do ...

The participants were also asked to comment on how they would approach changing their lives. This required them to consider the initial processes involved in attempting to move away from crime. Invariably, the participants commented that staying away from crime required a personal decision and a change of attitude. This section will highlight the key themes derived from the participant interviews in terms of decision-making and vulnerabilities to repetition.

Making decisions

All of the participants in the 18-24 years age group acknowledged that there were significant individual factors that contribute to changing one's life in terms of not doing crime. The primary individual factor each participant identified was that he or she had to decide they wanted to change; that it was up to them. Without a personal decision to change, people would continue to engage in crime – regardless of the services provided

or consequences instigated.¹³ The themes drawn from these discussions highlight several strategies that the interviewees relied on in their attempts to move away from doing crime.

For some of the participants, an incremental approach to changing their lives offered the most appropriate way forward. This appeared to make the decision more manageable and less overwhelming. For example, one participant noted that she wanted to change her life of drug-taking and crime (to support her drug habit) so decided to slowly reduce her consumption of ecstasy and acid, moving onto "weed". Although she said she found this change difficult to manage, she was hopeful that this change would stop her doing crime. Further, she commented that she had not accessed any support agencies for her drug-taking problems and was hopeful that she would be able to complete her "detox" on her own. She provided two reasons for her decision: first, she wanted to prove she could do it on her own; and second, she was not sure if she could trust an agency to help her without reporting her drug-taking to the authorities.

Another form of incremental approach employed by participants could be summarized as changing the type and frequency of crime. Several participants commented that thinking about changing their lives prompted different ways of acting. This was explained in various formats. One participant commented that, instead of visiting areas where he knew he would engage in crime, he stopped "hanging out" in those areas so often. He further clarified that, while he did not consciously plan to engage in crime when in these areas, he found that he did, due to the easy nature of doing crime. The type of crime he was referring to involved "burgs" and car theft. Another participant explained that, rather than spend all his time with a particular group of people whom he knew engaged in crime, he did not contact this group as regularly as he had before. In further discussion, he commented that he was not aware that he had made a formal decision not to contact this group of people. Rather, he commented that he started to associate with another group of people who, while still doing some crime, did not engage in the more serious aspects of criminal activity.¹⁴

Another participant employed a "loss/gain" model in making his decision to change. This young man spoke about how it was, *"just my choice, it comes from inside me, I just started to change"*. Through probing, he described how the adrenaline rush he gained from engaging in certain types of crime had waned. He explained that *"doing crime is addictive and exciting ... that sometimes you get more of a rush from actually planning*

¹³ On the issue of decision making see also Cusson and Pinsonneault 1986; Maruna 1997 and 2001; Leibrich 1993.

¹⁴ In the context of friends and desistance from crime see Akers et al. 1979; Elliot et al. 1985; Hepburn 1997; Warr and Stafford 1991.

and doing the crime than what you end up with". Over the course of two years he noticed that he'd begun to feel that the results were not worth the effort. He described how the initial adrenaline rush he had felt in the preceding years had declined and, consequently, he wanted to do something else. In this context he felt he had, "*grown tired of crime and all the shit involved in it*" (Male aged 21 years).

Other participants in this age group noted that their attitudes towards access to money had significantly altered. Money, for many of the participants, played a significant role in both their attitudes to doing crime and their attempts to move away from crime. It was certainly true that certain types of crime provided the participant group with access to large sums of money. Several comments make this clear:

Dealing in speed and ecstasy, I had lots of money ... more than you can imagine; thousands of dollars ... it's such a scene, it's easy to get and it's easy to get rid of ... once you've had that amount of money, working for a living it just isn't fun ...

(Male, aged 23)

Doing lots of fraud you get serious amounts of money ... you just right out the cheques and the money's yours ...

(Female, aged 22)

Working on the street ... its good ... I get \$300.00 in a few hours ... I can't get that anywhere else...

(Female, aged 18)

Thus moving away from crime requires that these young people re-evaluate their attitudes towards having access to large amounts of money. Again, the decisions here revolve around the notions of loss and gain. For the young participant involved in drug dealing, the threat of being caught and/or killed by other drug dealers impacted on his decision to move away from this form of criminal activity. However, he did comment that once you have had, "*that kind of money it is really easy to get sucked back into that life*".

Another approach to decision-making involved a form of restlessness with the status quo. Some participants noted that their internal dialogue started to change in terms of asking questions of themselves, and identifying that "*I am more*". The participants commented that, prior to thinking about not doing crime, their internal dialogue had consisted of thoughts and ideas about having fun, excitement and being with friends. For example,

When I was younger all I thought about was fun, scoring and being with my friends; it was all exciting ... everyone said I was a delinquent and, yeah, I was being desperate. I remember starting to think that I am more than my mother thinks I am, I'm not just a delinquent; it was all despair, you know, but it's better now and I know I am more than that.

(Female, aged 18 years)

I started to think about respect and proving them wrong, I deserve respect for all I have been through; I was chucked out of home and I survived on my own on the streets ...

(Male, aged 20 years)

The 14-17 years age group participants did not articulate a sense of a decision to stop doing crime. Rather, this group indicated that it was more external pressure that made them think about not doing crime. These external pressures included attending Juvenile Justice Team sessions, changing schools, leaving school and finding work, and undertaking different courses of study. These external structures impacted on their thinking about not doing crime. The importance of having a person listen to them without judgment appeared to help with their decision not to continue engaging in criminal activity.

I go to this new school centre where I do only a bit of school work – we do lots of outdoor stuff and work in the garden and help the builders. The people here listen to me, you know; it's much better than school where you just get shit all the time. I don't feel like I have to go crazy all the time anymore ...

(Male, aged 16)

I know I am on my last caution, but coming to ... is really good because I get to work with my hands ... it's better than school, I hate school and they hate me ... now I just want to get a job ...

(Male, aged 15)

Decision-making for both groups played an important role in moving away from crime. The older participants identified that the decision had to be made over and over again. In other words, they were aware that the social context in which they operated had implications on their decision to not do crime. This suggests that, while people acknowledge they have to make a difficult decision to move away from crime, social and economic factors make this process very complex.

Vulnerabilities and slippages

Decisions about doing crime and not doing crime appear to function on two levels. First, on a social level, particular drivers impact on the behaviour of the person to re-engage in criminal activity. Second, on the subject or identity level, the way in which a person perceives him or herself plays a part in their susceptibility to re-engage in criminal activity. For example, the young woman who wants to move away from drug-taking and crime by attempting to "detox" on her own, perceives herself as someone with resilience and a determination to change her life. Similarly, the young man who had been living on the streets but who had, at the time of the interview, found hostel accommodation and enrolled in a course of study, perceived himself to be a person who could undergo

hardship; who treated others with respect, and respected himself for the sorts of decisions he made. Grasping the significance of both drivers, and the way in which these levels interact, is imperative to understanding how people move towards a life in which doing crime is not their primary mode of being.

A further important point in this context refers to the different perceptions young people have about categorizing crime. Crimes such as drug use and addiction to substances, shop-lifting and graffiti, fraud, prostitution, drug-dealing and armed robbery have different connotations in terms of seriousness and, importantly, how they impact on one's identity.¹⁵ While all of these "crimes" are illegal according to the participant group, some are more illegal than others. As previously discussed, people often swing between engaging in crime and being "straight" for some periods only to "slip" back into the world of crime. On this point it is important to note that articulating an end point of "doing crime" is, in and of itself problematic. As one young participant commented: "*we all do crime, we just don't get caught; we speed, we steal stuff and I know lots of older people who smoke weed ... and that's all crime*".¹⁶

The majority of the interviewees articulated that being tempted back into crime is easier than moving towards a life that does not revolve around crime. Several of the participants also commented that this was not a simple progression forward. Rather, this was a slow and difficult process that required many attempts.

I'd been staying out of trouble, I wanted to change 'cause it was making my mum and dad sick, then I was out with my friends and we stole a car from a service station ... if I'd known it was an old person's car I wouldn't have stolen it, you know ... I didn't really want to but the police were after us for graffiti and the car was there so we took it ... it had the keys in it ...

(Male aged 16)

It's drugs ... that gets into you. I've been straight and clean and working ... I don't even really know how it happens ... there's drugs and I feel like, well, I've been really good, one won't hurt ... then I'm back into it again and it's really hard to stop again ...

(Male, aged 23)

Moreover, these participants identified that they were indeed surprised at the unexpected complexities involved in this process. The unexpected nature of this process involved the length of time required to bring about a change and the propensity to be drawn back into old habits and connections. Those in the age group 18-24 years identified that, even after long breaks of six months to one year away from old haunts and connections,

¹⁵ See Bottoms et al. 2004 for a discussion on the significance of young people's perceptions of crime and their decisions about desisting from criminal activity.

¹⁶ On this point see Sampson and Laub 2003.

simple reconnections enabled the movement back into doing crime. This was more prominent for those involved in substance misuse. However, another factor that was mentioned was the propensity to get angry, one participant explained: *"I get angry and just let go, if someone pisses me off I can have a short fuse"*.

Further vulnerabilities around social drivers included the loss of employment, breakdown of a relationship, imprisonment of a partner and chaotic familial relationships. Upon reflection, the older group of interviewees identified that these triggers had provided some of the rationale for re-engaging in crime, even though they had, at the time, been considering moving away from such activity. Two young men commented that they had lost their jobs due to erratic attendance (a consequence of drug-taking and excessive alcohol use) and that this had prompted each of them to re-engage in theft and shoplifting.

For the younger age group of 14-17 year olds, vulnerabilities revolve around connections to friends, social environment and substance misuse. For this group the importance of being with their friends often led them to re-engage in crime. Typical crimes included: stealing cars and joyriding, shoplifting, excessive drinking and graffiti. The susceptibility to be drawn back into was difficult to challenge. The imperative for this age group is friendship. All of the young people in this group discussed how they understood themselves in relation to their friendships. Several examples highlight this connection:

It is important to have friends to do things with ... we sneak out together and have a laugh ... we get wasted ... it's really fun ... if you don't have friends it's really boring ... with nothing to do ...

(Female, aged 15)

Every weekend I meet my friends and we go drinking ... sometimes we steal stuff ... parts of cars and store theft ... its hard to give up all the fun we have ... we know where the parties are and we just have a good time ... it's boring if you don't go out and have friends ...

(Male, aged 16)

For this group, acknowledging the impact others have on their decisions to act in particular environments and contexts is significant in relation to maintaining their decision to move away from crime.

For both groups of interviewees the possibility to slip back into doing crime is ever present. As one young person commented, *"I seem to slip up sometimes and get caught up in doing the same stuff again"*. Slippages for these young people refer to a sense of decline in the projected movement towards the goal of changing one's life in relation to doing crime. Importantly, slippages did not appear to indicate a sense of failure. Rather,

it appears to suggest that, *"if you want to you can get yourself together"*. As one young man commented, *"you have to know what things make you do crime and then try to keep away from them"*.

Slip-ups also seemed to occur at times when stress levels were increased, or when people felt they deserved a reward. In relation to the former, the participants recorded that stress levels tended to increase in response to unsuitable living arrangements (such as hostels with "harsh" rules), difficult relationships with parents, abusive or violent relationships with partners, coming to the end of a course of study and not knowing what to do next, and having to attend court. In the context being rewarded for the hard work of self transformation, many participants commented that no one seemed to notice such change or the commitment that it had taken. For these young people, some form of acknowledgement that they are doing well is pertinent to maintaining their decision to desist from crime.

Section Four: Strategies and Motivators

Maintaining motivation

Adam's Story

Adam left home at sixteen due to complex living arrangements with his mother, stepfather and young siblings. Adam explained that he felt jealous and spiteful about his young siblings "having everything". He explained he would get really angry and react violently with his parents, so he felt it was better to leave. He lived on the streets or in hostels for eighteen months. Adam explained that he had been involved in car theft, burglaries, graffiti and vandalism, assault, shoplifting and credit card fraud. He was not involved in any form of drug-taking or alcohol abuse. He explains his motivation to change comes from having watched many of his friends end up dead, in prison or having serious psychological problems due to significant drug-taking. Adam's description of his life and his attempts to change indicate the complexities required to maintain the motivation to change.

I was kicked out of home because I was rebellious ... I've lived on the streets for eighteen months and survived. I used to hang around train stations in the northern suburbs to scab money or mob people with my mates ... you get really bored 'cause there's not much to do ... we'd do crime for something to do ... open bus doors and steal all the money, steal alcohol from shops ... max out credit cards ... just for money ... living on the streets you see things ... my mate was beaten with a pole by some other gang, he's on life support ... they tried to get me but I got away ... I have tried before to be in a hostel but I've been kicked out ... the rules are really strict. This time I have to make it, I've been here for over three months and I hope to get into a transitional house soon ... I'm back doing school ... it's pretty easy ... I've seen my mum and that's OK. I really don't want to end up dead or in hospital ... I want things to be better in the future.

Participants also discussed some of the ways in which they dealt with triggers around doing crime. These strategies appear to function at both the identity level and at a social-contextual level. Importantly, the strategies changed depending on what stage the person was at in the transformation process. For those who were just beginning to question what they were doing with their lives, their main strategy involved simply being aware that they were questioning their behaviour. For those who had been moving away from crime for longer, the strategies were more target-specific. They included developing positive images, having a sense of "not giving up" if they slipped back into old habits.

The primary motivator that informs people's decisions about desistance is hope that life will be different in the future.¹⁷ "Hope" in this context refers to life being better – better in terms of being in a committed relationship: being able to have children; having some

¹⁷ See Maruna 2001 for a discussion on the significance of hope, determination and responsibility in relation to desistance.

form of stable employment and enough money, being in better health; and having some access to 'fun'. For others, "hope" is to do with simply maintaining their changed behaviour. As one participant commented, "*I just want to keep going as I am and not get caught up in all that stuff again*". Others also discussed "hope" in relation to levels of fearfulness. Many of the participants commented that doing crime, especially serious crime, incorporated levels of fear that impacted on their ability to engage with people, and trust, others. They expressed being fearful of being caught by the police; however, their primary source of fear was to do with the extent of violence that is associated with crime.

Target-specific strategies also included developing plans for the future. Both age groups identified that having plans was an important aspect of moving away from crime. Women in the 18-24 age group identified education and training as a valuable tool to keep them on track. Most importantly, further study or the completion of high school needed to be the young person's choice. The format of delivery also raised several points of interest. Three of the young women are studying in an external mode using both internet and hard copy study facilities. These women readily identified that they had tried to study at school or within facilities designed to assist people with "troubled" lives. Each considered this inappropriate as they had spent their time reconnecting with others equally caught up in crime. For the two young women in the 14-17 age group, one was undertaking school-based work in a one-on-one supported environment (which she found very helpful), while the other was undertaking a TAFE course on a part-time basis.

Completing high school or learning a trade was also important for the young men in the study. These young men, however, did not relate to the concept of external study, preferring to undertake hands-on face-to-face courses in areas such as building, carpentry or brickwork, motor mechanics, film-making or art-based courses. For the young men who were engaged in some form of study, each commented that, as with the women, it needed to be *their* choice. They also felt that the location of the course needed to be within easy access to their place of living.

Other plans included becoming fit, either through sport or physical work, and exploring options to travel. This latter was more pronounced for the young women, especially in terms of traveling for fun or a holiday. The young men, however, appeared keen to travel so as to access locations with high wage-earning potential. In the context of moving away from crime, the capacity to plan for the future is an integral aspect of changing one's actions and perceptions of oneself. As one young man explained, "*without some plan there is nowhere, only burnt bridges, hospital, gaol or death*".

Section Five: Perceptions of Support

Steven's Story

Steven is fifteen years old and lives with his parents. He explained he became involved with crime through friends with whom he would regularly “wag” school, steal car parts, break into houses; he has also been to court for assault. He attends school but would rather have a job; he would like to be a bricklayer. He plans to stop going to school when he is sixteen and find a job. For Steven, support has involved assistance through the Education Department to attend a school-to-work transitional program. He has also received some support from the court system through the Juvenile Justice Team. He explained his views about accessing support through the system:

The first time I got into trouble, the cops were on some kind of power trip ... they threw me on the ground and were really rude. The lady at court was really good and listened to me; she said I was too young to go to detention. I'm not good at school ... I don't want to go to school, I want to do bricklaying or do plastering ... I want someone to help me learn that kind of stuff and not all the stuff at school ...

The participants' perceptions of support services – aimed at deterring criminal activity or supporting young people to change their behaviour – provide valuable insights into the question of desistance. In particular, the views of young people regarding the role of police, juvenile workers, court staff, and detention were sought. Questions were also asked regarding what type of support services participants had accessed and what role parents, family and friends had on their decisions to disengage with crime. Several points can be drawn from the interview data in regards to the above categories.

In terms of the young people's perceptions of police, and whether their interactions with police impacted on their actions involving crime, all of the young people commented in various ways that interactions with police were not helpful. Further, there was a negative trend in this regard for the majority of young men in the study, who stated that police, “target them”, are “overly rough”, “use violence and threats of violence”, “put handcuffs on too tight”, “appear to be on a power trip” and “make up details of an arrest in order to lock you up”. The young women's experiences of police were also negative. They cited interactions involving excessive force, victimisation, not being listened to and being treated with disrespect.

Probing the participants' responses regarding their perceptions of police did bring to light two opposing views. On the one hand, the participants commented that police appeared

to be over zealous in their duties, especially in relation to force and threats. For most participants this prompted equally zealous forms of resistance. For example:

They chased me and pushed me ... they put me in lock-up so I wouldn't tell them my name for over two hours ...

(Male, aged 16)

They kept pushing me and grabbing me and hitting me with the baton ... so I whacked him ... then I got charged with assaulting a police officer...

(Male, aged 18)

One participant commented that he had had dealings with two police officers who were "decent":

The first time I got into trouble was when I was fourteen for shoplifting; the two police officers talked to me OK ... they didn't treat me like a dropkick, they had a good understanding of being a kid and they treated me with respect.

(Male, aged 17)

On the other hand, participants who had only minor involvement in doing crime said that their interactions with police and their "rough shot" tactics had instilled fear in them such that they did not want to get caught again.

Interactions between these young participants and juvenile workers also prompted various responses. For the younger group aged between 14-17 years, access and support from Juvenile Justice Team workers was perceived as being helpful and supportive on one level but naïve on another. Several of the young participants who had spent time with various teams stated that what they needed was someone to listen to them, not someone to tell them how to live.

In relation to their perceptions of court-based staff and processes, the participants generally described their treatment as respectful. Magistrates would provide space for the person to speak and, accordingly, the young people felt they had been heard. Further discussion also highlighted the complex nature of these interactions. On the one hand, the participants felt it was important to be heard in a respectful manner. On the other, some participants also stated that it was relatively easy to, "*pull together a sob story and make the judge believe it so you can get off*". This contradiction was experienced in both age groups of interview participants.

The subject of detention prompted the most cohesive response for the interviewees, with more than two thirds (18) of the participants believing that detention impacted negatively on their attempts to change their lives. Detention was viewed as a pathway to doing more crime. Detention also affected the way in which young people perceived themselves. One person who had spent some time in gaol explained, "*once you've been*

inside you stay inside in your head even when you come out ... it's hard to let go of that because people always remind you". Some participants thought that detention should be used earlier to "scare" young people away from crime. Their view is that people under eighteen years of age got it too easy, and if they had a taste of "punishment" then they would not go on to more serious crime.

Questions were also asked regarding access to support services and how these might impact on the person's shift away from crime. Support services included drop-in centres; services for homeless youth; legal services; Juvenile Justice Teams; outreach services; Police, Citizens' and Youth Clubs; the Department for Community Development; church organisations and drug referral centres. All of the interviewees remarked that access to these services was important, and their staff were helpful. Two of the young men commented that, if it had not been for hostel accommodation, they would still be living on the streets and doing more serious crime. However, not all comments regarding service use were positive. Some young people felt that services did not treat them with respect and weren't particularly attentive to privacy issues. Another form of response regarding accessing support services related to personal choice and control over one's life. Several young people commented that it was important to have access to services; however, the services would be better served by encouraging young people to be in control of their own lives rather than directing young people *how* to live.

Discussion about parents and other family connections raised several issues pertinent to moving away from crime. Of the interview cohort, only three people were living with their parents. Of the remaining twenty two interviewees, six were living with other relatives, while sixteen were either in hostel accommodation, private rental or with friends. Family support, in terms of desistance, was indicated in three areas. First, for young people with only minor criminal involvement it was important that they felt that their family supported and cared for them. Most of the interviewees commented that they found it difficult to talk to their parents about their lives and what they wanted to achieve. Second, it was evident that young people do not give up their relationship with their parents lightly. All of the participants commented that they would like to have had a better relationship with their parents. While these relationships were strained – and for some, irreconcilable – their comments suggested that they held hope that these differences could be resolved in the future. Third, for those with longer histories of criminal activity, support from parents or family members was not deemed to be imperative in the bid to change for the better. For this group, the most significant support related to a close relationship with *someone*, not necessarily a family member. Some sense of being connected to someone who cared for you and whom you cared about was prevalent amongst this group.

Section Six: Policy Context and Recommendations

Developing recommendations from these insights in relation to policy domains provides the possibility to further contextualise the points of view of young people involved in crime. It is the premise of this research that policy is a process that incorporates a diverse range of players that interact and interpret issues in order to develop a set of goals and the means to achieve those goals (Colebatch 2005; 2006). Rather than viewing policy as the authorised instrumental approach of governments making choices to solve problems (Bridgman and Davis 2004: 4), this project takes the view that policy develops out of the interplay between the complex negotiations of governing and the diversity of issues deemed appropriate for intervention. As such, it necessarily involves the use of power (Solebury 2002:95), the values of society, what can be known at any given time, and the particular ways in which society is organised (Colebatch 2005; Lindblom 1987; Stone 1989).

While the basic premise of this project was to listen to young people's stories about desistance from crime, contextualising these ideas within a policy framework highlights the dynamic nature of the policy-research nexus. Current research in this area demonstrates that, while there is increased demand for evidence-based research to inform policy development, the relationship between researchers and policy makers is complex, and does not simply provide a "research in policy out dynamic" (Edwards 2004: 5). The aim, therefore, in contextualising the insights and ideas developed from participants in this study does *not* work from the premise of changing current policy around young people and crime. Rather, these insights provide some way – albeit it in a minor fashion – for these voices to be included in policy considerations. Because policy in this area aims to reduce offending and to assist young people to make pro-social choices – or in other words, to change the behaviour of a particular group of people – grasping how young people understand this process could provide additional information into the policy matrix.

In Western Australia, current policy trends in the area of youth and crime incorporate particular acts and strategies which aim to reduce offending and incarceration rates in Western Australia. These include:

Child Welfare Act 1947

Bail Act 1981

Prisons Act 1982

Children's Court of Western Australia Act 1988

Young Offenders Act 1994

Young Offenders Regulations 1995

Sentence Administration Act 2003

Young Offenders Amendment Act 2004 (proclaimed in Jan 1, 2005)

Prisons and Sentencing Legislation Amendment Act 2006

Policy initiatives in the area of youth crime involve a cautioning and referral program which aims to divert young people away from the court-based system. The aim is twofold: to prevent young people from becoming embedded in the legal system, and to support young people to desist from crime. All of the young people in the 14-17 age group in this study have been through the cautioning process, with two-thirds (10) being on their second caution. Insights drawn from the interview data suggest that the cautioning process is positive, with most of the participants perceiving it as non-judgemental and supportive.

A further policy initiative includes the use of Juvenile Justice Teams (JJT) who work with the young person and his or her family in developing a plan of action around the offending behaviour. Again, two-thirds of the younger age group of participants have participated in these sessions. Themes drawn from the interview data suggest that the manner in which the offender is engaged depends on the team members. Two-thirds of the younger group described these sessions as a, "*waste of time: they just talk at you*"; "*they just try show you how to not hurt yourself with drugs*" and "*I didn't understand what they were talking about*". The other one-third, indicated that they were satisfied with the process. These opposing views suggest that policy initiatives which aim to assist young people to change their behaviour need to be attentive to the role of language and the level of comprehension of the young person involved. They also suggest that an important aspect of intervention programs might be to encourage young people to speak about themselves, and about how and why they have become involved in crime and how they might desist from crime.

The issue of attending these sessions which, for the most part, is required as part of the cautioning process raises several questions regarding the double role of the JJT. They are required to both assist young people in changing their behaviour and oversee the compliance requirements of the cautioning system.¹⁸ The responses from the young people in this study suggest that the purpose of these sessions is somewhat conflicted, operating as they do as a support mechanism and a punitive measure. A recommendation, therefore, for this policy initiative is to ensure that the legal implications are adequately explained, and that the goals associated with this process are clear. Moreover, the context in which support is provided would be better served if it were clearly separated from the legal implications of attendance/non attendance.

¹⁸ See Denning and Homel 2007 for a discussion in this area.

A further related recommendation refers to the manner in which goals are negotiated between the young person and the legal assisting body. All of the young people in this study commented that being instructed to attend sessions either with Juvenile Justice Teams, drug referral centres or educational and behavioural management programs need to take seriously that young people want to engender a feeling that *they* are in control of their lives; that the terms by which *they* live have not been pushed on to them by an external body. The young people in this project readily admitted to, "*doing crime*" and "*making mistakes and having to pay something for that*". However, the majority of people in this study articulated that, if programs, services and plans were forced upon them, the likelihood is that they would *resist*. Although forms of intervention are necessary, and, for many people welcome, it is apparent that "one size does not fit all". Therefore, it is recommended that each person's circumstances, background, comprehension and desire to change are pertinent to the development of goals designed to assist those who want to desist from crime.

Three further insights can be drawn from the interview data that relate to policy initiatives in this area. First, there is a clear need for an embedding of reward or ritual for people who have completed a program, returned from a period of detention, or successfully changed aspects of their behaviour. For many of the young people in this study, the idea of rewarding oneself for undertaking the hard work of change often resulted in reengaging with drug-taking, excessive alcohol use, joyriding or other forms of risk-taking behaviour. The implication is that, for many young people, acknowledgement of their commitment to change their lives requires both an outlet to "let their hair down", and some type of recognition that the person is doing well.

Secondly, strategies need to be developed that assist with alleviating some of the social, cultural and political factors that systematically exclude groups of young people from the broader community. As evident from the interview data, the issue of friends is of particular significance to young people. That these young people do not know how to develop friendships with people who lead more pro-social lives raises a significant challenge for policy and programs which aim to assist young people away from criminal activity. Finally, the young people in this study emphasised "fun and excitement" as integral to their lives. This is not to suggest that decision-making in relation to policy initiatives must include a sense of fun or excitement, but it is to point out that part of why young people become involved in crime is that it is viewed in terms of entertainment; of alleviating the banality of everyday life. Therefore, incorporating "fun" into assisting young people to change their lives is imperative.

Concluding Comments

As this project has alluded, the reasons why young people try to change their actions, thoughts and perceptions around doing crime are varied, as are the processes by which they attempt this shift. This project has provided a snapshot of what some young people with a history of engaging in crime think about the issue. It has also documented their attempts to understand themselves as they move towards a life in which doing crime is not their primary mode of acting. As a snapshot these stories, themes and ideas indicate the complexity involved in any attempt at personal transformation; they also suggest some useful ideas for those interested in assisting people in their move away from doing crime.

The primary theme derived from these stories is the significance of how young people manage the shift away from doing crime. The majority of young people in this study could be seen to be moving in this direction (although two of the twenty five people did not readily see themselves as moving in this direction as both felt they would be serving some time in detention in the near future – one is currently in goal). While the participants identified a range of “management strategies”; all participants identified that changing their behaviour around crime was slow, more difficult than anticipated, and often plagued by falling back into old habits. An important point in this context is that the occasional “slip-up” was not interpreted as a form of failure for these young people. Rather, it was viewed as becoming aware of one’s habits, of the patterns and triggers that can push one to repeat known experiences and connections.

This project utilised a form of approach that encouraged young people to speak about their world and their interpretations of themselves. The methodology in this context enabled these young people to speak, think and consider how their world was rendered meaningful for them, how they might be able to change their world, and the steps they might take in this process. By taking this approach, the project is not attempting to privilege the voices of these young people; it is not suggesting that simply listening to their views will provide the means to change their behaviour around crime. Rather, the project takes the view that in assisting young people in the complex task of self-transformation certain awarenesses are required. These awarenesses are borne out of a thorough analysis of the factors that contribute to the ways in which young people become embedded in particular ways of acting in the world.

As a way forward, the project provided one type of approach to the complex issues involved in understanding young people and their attempts to move away from doing crime. While the findings from this study indicate the relevance of listening to the views

of young people, the project acknowledges that the methods employed provided only a snapshot of these participants' lives. Further research in this area needs to develop methods that encourage young people to express their views, and their interpretations of the ways in which they manage social transformation. Such research would enable the exploration of the social, political and cultural blockages that obstruct young people from moving away from crime. Moreover, such research would enable further analysis of the manner in which policy that aims to reduce crime and offending is developed, implemented and evaluated.

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Appendix 1

Interview Prompts

1. What age are you now?
2. Are you working full time or part time or studying?
3. Would you say you are on the straight and narrow now or do you still do some crime?
4. What would you say were the biggest factors helping you stop doing crime?
5. What were the most important factors that led to you getting involved in crime in the first place?
6. How old were you when you first got involved in crime?
7. How was the treatment you got from the court?
8. Did the treatment from the court help you not to do crime?
9. How did the police treat you?
10. Did the treatment of police help you to not do crime?
8. What sorts of things could happen now that would make it more likely that you would commit crime again?
9. What could the police or courts do that would make it easier for young people not to get involved in crime?
10. What about your parents? Were they a factor in how you got involved in crime?
11. Did your parents help you stop doing crime?
11. What about those involved in the juvenile justice system – did they do anything that made it less likely you would continue to commit crime?
12. Is there anything more the juvenile justice department or the welfare could do that would make it less likely young people to continue with crime?
13. What do you think are the most important things to change so that young people don't get involved in crime or stop after they have started?
14. Would you say that the system is operating as well as it could to encourage young people away from crime?

Appendix 2: Information Letter and Consent Forms



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Yvonne Haigh, Senior Researcher
Tel: 08 – 9360 2991
Email: Y.haigh@murdoch.edu.au

**Why they desist:
Understanding the life worlds of
young people with a conviction history**

I work at Murdoch University and I am helping people at the Institute of Restorative Justice and Penal Reform in a study on young people and the criminal justice system. I am interested in how young people get into situations that might get them into trouble with the law. I would also like to know about the sorts of things that make it easier or more difficult to stop being in trouble with the law.

I would like to hear from young people themselves, to find out what it is like for them to offend or to try not to offend. This information will be used to try to understand what happens to young people who have been in trouble with the law and to help those who wish to make a change in their lives.

If you agree to participate please complete the details below. All interviews will be tape recorded and a copy of the interview will be forwarded to you. No information that would identify you will be used in the research. Participation in this research is voluntary and you may pull out at any time without giving a reason.

If you have any questions about this project please contact either Professor Trish Harris on 9360 2252 or Dr. Yvonne Haigh 9360 2991, or alternatively you can contact Murdoch University's Human Ethics Committee on 9360 6677.

I have read the information above. Any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to take part in this activity, however, I know that I may change my mind and stop at any time.

I understand that all information provided is treated as confidential and will not be released by the investigator unless required to do so by law.

I agree that research data gathered for this study may be published, provided my child's name or other identifying information is not used.

Participant
Date

Researcher
Date



Murdoch
UNIVERSITY

South Street
Murdoch, WA 6150
Yvonne Haigh, Senior Researcher
Tel: 08 – 9360 2991
Email: Y.haigh@murdoch.edu.au

**Why they desist:
Understanding the life worlds of
young people with a conviction history**

Dear Parent,

My name is Dr. Yvonne Haigh and I am doing some research on young people who have had some involvement with the justice system. The project is aimed at gaining information into the factors that impact on the decision of young people to offend or to stop offending. The research is focused on the stories of young people and it aims to provide an avenue for these people to express their views and experiences.

The overall aim of the project is to gain information about what type of support young people and their families need to assist with moving away from offending behaviour. This information will be used to identify potential pathways out of offending and it will also identify useful strategies for those interested in helping young people who are at risk of offending.

To gather this information I will need to interview young people and ask a range of questions regarding their views on factors that impacted in their decision to offend. I will also ask about their view of people who have assisted them through the justice system. These interviews will be strictly confidential. If you are happy for your child to participate in this activity please fill out the consent form attached and send it back to the agency assisting your child.

Regards

Yvonne

Dr. Yvonne Haigh
Centre for Social and Community Research
Murdoch University



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**Why they desist:
Understanding the life worlds of
young people with a conviction history**

Dear Parent,

I work at Murdoch University and I am helping the people at the Institute of Restorative Justice and Penal Reform in a study on young people and the criminal justice system. I am interested in how young people get involved in situations that might get them into trouble with the law. I would also like to know about the sorts of things that make it easier or more difficult to stop being in trouble with the law.

I would like to hear from young people themselves, to find out what it is like for them to offend or to try not to offend. This information will be used to better understand the circumstances of young people who have been in trouble with the law and to support those who wish to make a change in their lives. However, for the views of young people in the 14 – 17 age groups it is important to gain the consent of parents or guardians. If you are happy for your child to participate in this project please complete the details below. If you have any questions about this project please contact Dr. Yvonne Haigh on 9360 2991 or Professor Trish Harris on 9360 2252. Alternatively you can contact Murdoch University’s Human Ethics Committee on 9360 6677.

I have read the information above. Any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree that (child’s name) can take part in this activity, however, I know that I may change my mind and stop at any time.

I understand that all information provided is treated as confidential and will not be released by the investigator unless required to do so by law.

I agree that research data gathered for this study may be published, provided my child’s name or other identifying information is not used.

Participant
Date

Researcher
Date



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**Why they desist:
Understanding the life worlds of
young people with a conviction history**

I work at Murdoch University and I am helping people at the Institute of Restorative Justice and Penal Reform in a study on young people and the criminal justice system. I am interested in your views about assisting young people to move away from criminal activity. I would also like to know about the sorts of things you think could make it easier or more difficult for young people to stop being in trouble with the law.

If you agree to participate please complete the details below. All interviews will be tape recorded and a copy of the interview will be forwarded to you. No information that would identify you will be used in the research. Participation in this research is voluntary and you may pull out at any time without giving a reason.

If you have any questions about this project please contact either Professor Trish Harris on 9360 2252 or Dr. Yvonne Haigh 9360 2991, or alternatively you can contact Murdoch University's Human Ethics Committee on 9360 6677.

I have read the information above. Any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to take part in this activity, however, I know that I may change my mind and stop at any time.

I understand that all information provided is treated as confidential and will not be released by the investigator unless required to do so by law.

I agree that research data gathered for this study may be published, provided my child's name or other identifying information is not used.

Participant
Date

Researcher
Date