

Desistance from crime:

Working with protective factors

Overview

There is no universal definition of desistance from crime. However, it is generally accepted that it is an ongoing, subjective journey towards an offence-free life, complete with relapses and recoveries, rather than just abstinence from offending (Willis et al., 2010). 'Protective factors' are social, environmental, or psychological features that help with desistance, such as prosocial relationships and employment. Helping individuals by promoting and supporting these protective factors in their lives gives us the opportunity to boost their chances of desisting from crime. This report focuses on three key areas relating to desistance and explores what the evidence base tells us about how these protective factors can be applied in people's lives.

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Key areas

The three key areas considered in this evidence summary are: **differences between men and women** in relation to how protective factors operate; protective factors in relation to **neighbourhood crime**; and **the role of education** in desistance. These areas cover a wide range of protective factors, and they can be summarised as follows.

Differences between men and women. Family support, intimate relationships, and parenthood all have the potential to support desistance for both men and women. It is likely that these factors interact with internal processes of agency, hope, and motivation, which, in turn, can encourage individuals to take up prosocial opportunities such as legitimate employment. The desistance process for women, however, appears to be more complex when compared to that for men. For example, motherhood can be a protective factor, but the shame and stigma of being a mother with a criminal record can weaken this.

Neighbourhood crime. As 'neighbourhood crime' is a relatively new concept (encompassing burglary, robbery, and theft from a person/vehicle), there has so far been little focus on desistance from neighbourhood crimes per se. However, some studies exploring desistance have noted the type of convictions in their sample, which enables a focus on offence types that are defined as neighbourhood crime. Desistance in young people who have carried out neighbourhood crime can be best supported via a holistic approach that addresses different aspects of the social environment, e.g., prosocial peer groups and use of leisure time. This is particularly important, as it can interrupt the development of a criminal career, thus preventing future victims.

Desistance is an ongoing, subjective journey towards an offence-free life, complete with relapses and recoveries.

Education and desistance. Prison education has a positive impact on desistance. Assisting and enabling individuals to reconnect with education supports a positive identity transformation, and it reduces the likelihood of reoffending. However, due to funding issues and perceived stigmatisation, the success levels of people completing education in the community after release from prison are mixed.

There are protective factors other than those considered here, such as accommodation, substance-misuse treatment, attachment style, and participation in offending behaviour programmes. These should also be considered to gain a fuller understanding of desistance, as well as the extent to which protective factors vary between people who have committed different kinds of offences.

Background context

Although there has been a focus on the risk factors that increase the likelihood of reoffending for many decades, the *protective* factors involved in desistance from crime are now beginning to receive more attention. Establishing how and why individuals move away from crime is essential for reducing reoffending rates; gaining a deeper understanding of this will allow targeted interventions to help the desistance process.

People can experience barriers to desistance, such as unemployment, homelessness, and substance misuse.

However, the process of desistance is 'invariably difficult to unravel and understand and encompasses a whole range of personal and contextual changes' (Priestley & Vanstone, 2019, p. 335). Research has documented how people can experience barriers to desistance, such as unemployment, homelessness, and substance misuse, alongside issues such as lack of self-esteem, negative labelling, and isolation

(Batty, 2020); all of these factors have a significant impact on the ability of an individual to change. These social contexts and networks are believed to be key for understanding long-term desistance (Maruna & Mann, 2019). Such desistance events, behaviours, and actions are underpinned by protective factors (Serin et al., 2016; Ward, 2017), and these form the basis of this evidence summary.

'Protective factor' is an umbrella term that can encompass social, environmental, or psychological features that help to lower the risk of reoffending.

What are protective factors?

There are varying definitions of protective factors, along with different terminology that is often used interchangeably, including 'strengths', 'resilience', or 'promotive factors'. Arguably, however, 'protective factor' is an umbrella term that can encompass social, environmental, or psychological features that help to lower the risk of reoffending. These may be static/unchangeable, e.g., secure attachment in childhood, or potentially changeable, such as employment status (de Vries Robbé et al., 2015). Because this evidence summary seeks to establish how future desistance can be best supported, it will focus on changeable protective factors.

Why do people desist from crime?

There are many theories that seek to understand and explain the desistance process, including maturation (Shulman et al., 2016), the presence of social bonds (Laub & Sampson, 2001), and cognitive transformation (Maruna, 2001). However, due to the limitations of each of these individual theories, an 'interactionist' approach is generally considered appropriate. This approach is based on the understanding

that both external factors (e.g., employment) *and* internal processes (e.g., a sense of agency) are required to enable the change associated with desistance (King, 2013; McAlinden, 2007).

From this perspective, an openness to change, exposure to a particular 'hook' or turning point, and the envisioning of a prosocial self are *all* argued to be required in the desistance process (Giordano et al., 2002).

Are desistance journeys different for men and women?

Here, we focus on the protective factors that generate the most discussion in the literature in terms of the differences between men and women.

Family ties and prosocial support are reported in the literature as being key protective factors that lower the risk of reoffending in men. They are believed to insulate men from criminal influences, provide emotional support, and help with the process of forming a non-criminal identity (Alward et al., 2020; Wooditch et al., 2014).

Family ties and prosocial support are believed to insulate men from criminal influences.

Individuals on the path to desistance may feel a 'pull' back to previous criminal groups (Kemshall, 2021). However, family support and relationships are understood to have the most impact on optimism when released from prison, as they enable a new 'possible' self to be imagined (Visher & O'Connell, 2012). This increase in hope, particularly when the individual identifies as a 'family man', is documented as being a protective factor. This, in turn, helps individuals to deal better with disappointments and frustrations, such as having trouble finding suitable accommodation in line with licence conditions; it also helps them to take advantage of prosocial

opportunities when they arise, such as employment or positive relationships (LeBel et al., 2008). Similarly, Berg and Heubner (2011) provided evidence that prosocial support from family can encourage identity transformation in people with convictions, which in turn enables them to reintegrate themselves using prosocial means, such as legitimate employment.

Having a non-offending 'best' friend and satisfaction with friendships are only related to desistance in women.

Women also benefit from the social bonds described above; however, these relationships often also include peers. In a recent review of the literature, criminal friends were reported to negatively influence both men and women; however, it seems that having a non-offending 'best' friend and satisfaction with friendships are only related to desistance in women (Rodermond et al., 2016). This is supported by a recent review by Farmer (2019), which identified having strong ties and relationships as a protective factor for women and recognised the importance of having both family *and* friends who can be relied upon in their rehabilitation. Another perspective, however, questions the support of the family for women who have offended, stating that these relationships can instead be characterised by unacceptance, involve a lack of trust and require significant emotional capital from the woman (Österman, 2022).

Marriage and romantic relationships are also consistently reported in the literature as social bonds that encourage a change in lifestyle, peer groups, and obligations, resulting in desistance (Laub & Sampson, 2001). The evidence on this point is mixed when comparing men and women. Some studies have reported marriage as being more likely to increase desistance in men than women (e.g., Doherty & Ensminger,

2013). However, Cobbina et al. (2012) reported that good-quality prosocial relationships with partners (or strong ties with parents) lowered reoffending risk in women, but that the reduction was only present in males if they had a below-average number of arrests.

For women specifically, good-quality relationships with peers and intimate partners can encourage financial security and therefore reinforce a sense of ability to change (Leverentz, 2014). Similarly, relationships that centre on trust, understanding, and a lack of judgement are argued to be vital to women's desistance (Rutter, 2019). It is important to note here that women who have offended often have a history of victimisation from abuse and violence in their interpersonal relationships (Gomm, 2016). For some women, it may be the *leaving* of an abusive relationship that acts as a protective factor, encouraging a sense of agency and subsequent desistance (Rutter & Barr, 2021).

Having children, along with family ties, can enable a cognitive shift towards a new, more prosocial 'possible' self.

Parenthood is another protective factor that is prominent in the literature when considering differences between men and women's desistance. Visher and O'Connell (2012) reported how having children, along with family ties, was one of the strongest predictors of optimism and hope for the future for men and women equally, enabling a cognitive shift towards a new, more prosocial 'possible' self. Evidence focusing on men specifically reports that having a first child is a strong predictor for desistance against serious offending (Zoutewelle-Terovan et al., 2014). However, others have reported that this desistance may only be temporary for aggressive crimes (Abell, 2018) and that being a father is correlated with a

reduction in substance abuse but less so with other deviant behaviour (Mitchell et al., 2018).

The discussion of motherhood is more complex. For women, offending perpetuates guilt and shame due to failing to achieve the social norm of what it means to be a 'good woman/mother/partner' (Rutter & Barr, 2021). This association is reported to be at much higher levels for women than for men (De Boeck et al., 2018), and it impacts on women's relationships, including those with their children (Rutter & Barr, 2021). Despite this, motherhood is recognised in the literature as a 'hook for change' that encourages a shift towards a prosocial identity. Desisting mothers are often seen to take active steps to resolve some of the problems that obstruct their maternal role, e.g., accepting support from a current partner or stopping using drugs, thus strengthening the bond with their children (Rodermond et al., 2022). The ability of women with children to maintain desistance, however, may be affected by further challenges such as a lack of stable accommodation and financial problems due to relationship breakdown (McIvor et al., 2009).

Desistance-related support should ideally be tailored to an individual's needs, with additional consideration given to the strength and quality of existing relationships.

In summary, there is evidence of differences in the desistance process between men and women, particularly with regard to family and interpersonal relationships. However, these differences are complex, and the evidence is not consistent: what may help or encourage one individual may turn another towards crime. A 'one size fits all' approach to desistance would therefore be ineffective. Instead, desistance-related support should ideally be tailored to an

individual's needs, with additional consideration given to the strength and quality of existing relationships, and particularly the context within which women are trying to desist.

What protective factors are relevant for neighbourhood crime?

Neighbourhood crime encompasses burglary, robbery, theft from a person, and theft from a vehicle. However, little to no research has investigated this specific group of crimes. Burglary and robbery, however, have been examined individually and can therefore be discussed.

The motivation for these crimes largely focuses on social and economic factors, with crime being based on opportunistic financial or social gains (Bottoms et al., 2004). Robbery has been labelled as a 'crime of poverty' (Hale et al., 2002; Hallsworth & Young, 2004), but it also includes social motivations such as building respect among peers (Briggs, 2008). Strategies for encouraging desistance have mirrored these motivations and often focus on changing circumstances in an individual's environment. The existing evidence base primarily relates to young people. However, it is important to recognise that support should also be offered to individuals who begin their desistance journey later in life (Farrington et al., 2014).

Providing positive role models for young people is reported to assist in the reduction of reoffending.

Positive mentoring has reportedly improved desistance in young people convicted of crimes such as burglary. Burglary is reported to begin from a lack of positive role models and the related influence of older criminal men (Mullins & Wright, 2003). Providing positive role models for young people through a structured programme is, therefore, reported to assist in the reduction of reoffending (Blechman et al., 2000).

Employment is similarly argued to act as a protective factor by changing the social environment of a young person with convictions and therefore also disrupting the criminal culture (MacKenzie & De Li, 2002). The opportunity to form relationships with prosocial colleagues, which increases social capital and feelings of belonging, is believed to act as a deterrent against behaviour that would jeopardise this, such as criminal activity (Oswald, 2020).

For young people specifically, programmes promoting employment are associated with a reduction in burglary offences, and findings suggest that younger men are more likely to commit these crimes if they are unemployed (Carmichael & Ward, 2000). However, the effectiveness of employment as a protective factor appears to be moderated by the quality of the work, including its stability and prospects (Oswald, 2020). In addition, limitations to accessing the social bond of employment, often perpetuated by disorganised and unstable communities, can increase the risk of future anti-social behaviour (Visher & O'Connell, 2012).

Support for substance abuse needs to interact with other protective factors to result in successful desistance

Support for substance abuse is prominent in the literature. Substance use has been described as a 'launching pad' for criminal careers and is associated with an increase in subsequent offending (DeLisi et al., 2015; Hayhurst et al., 2017). Substance-abuse prevention programmes can therefore support young people in their desistance process (Roth & Pierce, 2019). For example, Jainchill et al., (2015) found that court ordered treatment for substance abuse, that integrated a therapeutic community style, significantly reduced property crime including burglary in young people. Caution is needed here, however, as protective

factors are not simply the absence of a risk factor (Lösel & Farrington, 2012), meaning that support for substance abuse needs to interact with other protective factors to result in successful desistance.

Internal motivations have not been discussed in relation to neighbourhood crimes specifically, although young people are reported to desist when they have a willingness to change (Zemel et al., 2016). The ability to envision the future, paired with positive external drivers such as willingness, has been shown to be a good moderator of young people's attitudes and behaviours and a positive motivation for desistance (Villeneuve et al., 2019).

In summary, support to achieve employment and move away from substance abuse, as well as the presence of prosocial role models, can be beneficial for young people who have carried out neighbourhood-type crimes. More research is required, however, to explore the desistance journeys of older people who carry out neighbourhood crimes.

To what extent is education a protective factor?

Achievement in school, along with a strong bond with it, is reported to be an important protective factor and a buffer against delinquent behaviour (for further discussion, see: Lösel & Bender, 2017). There is also some discussion in the literature regarding the impact that previous education may have on an individual's ability to gain well-paid employment on release from prison (e.g., Bui & Morash, 2010). However, this body of literature is less focused on desistance as it tends to consider the journey *into* crime.

Participating in prison education can reduce the likelihood of recidivism by approximately a third.

Does education reduce reoffending?

The discussion of education and desistance focuses mainly on prison education. Bozick et al. (2018) reported a 28% reduction in reoffending rates for individuals who had taken part in prison education programmes when compared to those who had not. This finding held true for all levels of education. Davis et al. (2013) similarly concluded that individuals who participated in education had less chance of returning to prison.

Higher education can support the development of personal agency through exposure to new prosocial networks.

Ellison et al. (2017) reported that participating in prison education can reduce the likelihood of recidivism by approximately a third, with those who have engaged in prison education being 24% more likely to find employment than those who have not. This effect is thought to be greater for those who have engaged in higher education specifically (Chappell, 2003; Farley & Pike, 2016; Kim & Clark, 2013). However, barriers such as the prison not having a therapeutic climate, a lack of support from family and friends, and long waiting lists, combined with short sentences (MacKenzie, 2020; Hughes, 2021), are reported as impacting on the effectiveness of prison education.

Does education have an impact on desistance?

Education is reported to support positive identity change/transformation (e.g., Baranger et al., 2018), with a return to education reflecting internal agency and active efforts to develop a prosocial identity (Abeling-Judge, 2019). Jones and Jones (2021) reported that higher education can support the development of personal agency through exposure to new prosocial networks as well as knowledge and skills.

Evidence summary

Although for some there was a perception that universities were not welcoming of ‘people like them’, they concluded that with the right support/delivery, higher education can be a hook for positive change.

Evidence demonstrates the importance of embedding a culture of education in prisons in England and Wales.

It is important to acknowledge that the majority of the research into prison education was undertaken in the US and Canada. This means that care is needed when applying the findings to England and Wales due to its potentially different prison climate. However, the evidence demonstrates the importance of embedding a culture of education in prisons in England and Wales, as outlined by the House of Commons Education Committee (2022) in their report of the inquiry on prison education.

Not feeling accepted can amplify feelings of social isolation and loneliness.

In the community?

Financial constraints, along with the stigma of being labelled as an ‘ex-offender’, potentially deter individuals from studying in the community. Not feeling accepted can amplify feelings of social isolation and loneliness that may develop from ‘knifing off’ previous friendships and networks (Hughes, 2021). There are also issues of continuity if individuals are released from prison part way through a course, along with criminal background checks that may impact future prospects regardless of a person’s level of education (Baranger et al., 2018). In summary, however, there is clear evidence that prison education is a protective factor in the desistance process.

Conclusions

The evidence suggests that desistance-related **support should be tailored** in line with the **differing needs of men and women** and with an understanding of the complexities surrounding women’s desistance specifically. For young people who commit neighbourhood crimes, **support to achieve employment** and move away from substance abuse, as well as the presence of **prosocial role models** can be beneficial. Finally, although education in the community on release from prison has varying success, **prison education has been shown to support desistance** from crime.

Helping individuals by promoting and supporting these protective factors provides us with the opportunity to boost their chances of desisting from crime.



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