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# **“Put it in Your Toolbox”: How Vocational Programs Support Formerly Incarcerated Persons through Reentry**

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## **Abstract**

This study utilized life story interviews with 21 formerly incarcerated individuals to examine the role vocational reentry programming played in the desistance process. We begin with a review of theories of desistance and the state of reentry programs. A thematic analysis revealed that providers assisted individuals to understand their behavioral trajectories and to take steps toward desistance. Further, participants felt empowered by program provided social support, developed strategies to overcome employment barriers, and held resilient and optimistic attitudes in changing their identities and behavioral trajectories. We conclude with a discussion on how these findings can inform desistance theory and reentry policy.

## **Keywords**

desistance, reentry programs, vocational programming, barriers to reentry

## Introduction

Challenges in reentry, from the justice-involved individual's perspective, service provider's perspective, and the system's perspective, are plentiful. Incarcerated individuals tend to be undereducated, and often lack vocational training and legitimate work experience prior to entering prison (Petersilia, 2003; Richmond, 2014; Western, 2006). Despite a relatively grim landscape for corrections, research has demonstrated that prison can serve as a turning point from crime when returning individuals have the resources to succeed after release (Harding, Morenoff et al., 2019). For casual observers, the turning point appears organically by coincidence or as the result of some moral awakening by the formally incarcerated individual. Astute observers are more specific. For years, researchers have touted cognitive-behavioral, evidence-based interventions/practices as essential in encouraging turning points in behavioral trajectories (i.e., improving reentry outcomes) (Lipsey et al., 2007; Visher et al., 2011; Wilson et al., 2005). However, most reentry programs are more pragmatic, and seek to provide returning individuals with informed personal advocacy as they navigate the criminal justice system (Western, 2018). These programs also connect participants with community services to help overcome structural barriers such as employment and housing discrimination against those with felony records (Kendall et al., 2018; Leasure & Martin, 2017).

A number of evaluations have examined how employment reentry programming affects recidivism. While Visher et al. (2005) found that employment programs did not affect recidivism, others found employment-based reentry programs to be associated with lower recidivism and increased odds of post-release employment among formerly incarcerated participants (Duwe, 2015; Kansas Department of Corrections, 2009; Skardhamar & Telle, 2009). However, some have suggested that focusing on cross-sectional employment and recidivism outcomes often fails to measure the full spectrum of quality-of-life improvements (Kendall et al., 2018; Visher & Travis, 2003).

A more theoretical view incorporates the concept of desistance from criminal offending as a societal goal (Blumstein et al., 1985). Desistance studies tend to focus on the cessation of criminal offending and utilize static correlates rather than exploring the processes that contribute to desistance (Williams & Schaefer, 2021). To address this

gap, researchers ought to examine desistance processes and the role context plays in potentially creating or supporting change (Bersani & Doherty, 2018; Rocque, 2021). Reentry is a period when desistance processes and context are salient, as (1) supervision of the individual gives way to surveillance and (2) the individual is exposed to social factors that may have contributed to prior criminality.

In this study, we examine the lives of justice-involved individuals who returned to the community with the help of a reentry program. We followed their psychological and behavioral pathways through the reintegration process to uncover barriers, challenges, and strategies they use when reentering the community. The goal of this study is to improve our knowledge regarding strategies that agencies, reentry programs, and evaluators take in determining reentry success.

## **Literature Review**

### *Theories of Desistance*

Most criminal offenders commit multiple offenses throughout their lives, even after an arrest or incarceration (Blumstein et al., 1985). Incarceration may pause offending by increasing correctional oversight and decreasing opportunities, but the central question remains “how can agencies and organizations support desistance processes?” Researchers and practitioners working in the area of reentry frequently conceptualize desistance as a binary concept (such as “did not return to prison”), perhaps because federal and local funding sources emphasize this outcome, but also because it is simple to understand and operationalize with administrative data. However, significant advances have been made in recent years, both in pragmatically redefining desistance, as well as theories of how the process of desistance occurs. Regarding the former, it is now widely accepted that desistance is a process rather than a discrete event, desistance can be occurring even in the face of new criminal activity, and “criminality” (or propensity to reoffend) is a much richer measure that provides greater information on individual improvement (Rocque, 2021). Because it is a process, a certain amount of relapse is to be expected. In short, desistance should be considered a decline in criminal propensity, which may or may not be immediately evident in reductions in crime or incarceration (Rocque, 2021).

Concerning advances in theories of desistance, the process has traditionally been understudied relative to the onset and acceleration in offending (Laub & Sampson, 2003; Moffitt, 1993). However, considerable attention has been directed toward desistance in the last few decades (National Institute of Justice, 2021; Williams & Schaefer, 2021). Researchers conducting these studies tend to adopt either a *structural* or *subjective* approach. Structural approaches focus on how inner-city poverty and limited labor markets continue to propagate criminal behavior (Bushway et al., 2007; Harris, 2011). Rather than address these structural crime contributors, government leaders focused intervention efforts on the individual level by allocating taxpayer dollars to reentry providers that aim to develop the cognitive abilities and employment skillsets of the justice involved population. Structural approaches have been critiqued, however for undervaluing the role of human agency in criminal behavior (Paternoster & Bushway, 2009), even if the rebuttal suggests that people lack agency to select which choices are accessible to them (Felson, 1986; Laub & Sampson, 2003).

Scholars who view desistance from subjective angles explore the processes in which individuals navigate desistance pathways (Williams & Schaefer, 2021). For instance, Maruna (2001) found that individuals who both desist from and persist in criminal offending made commitments to non-offending lifestyles, but only successful desisters made sense of their past by distorting it to align with their current prosocial self. Maruna asserted that it was through the constructions of these “redemption scripts” that passive cognitive behavioral transformation occurs. Indeed, a growing number of researchers studying desistance have stressed the need to consider, in addition to social structural factors, the role that human agency plays in negotiating social structural factors (Giordano et al., 2002, 2007; Healy, 2014; King, 2012; Paternoster & Bushway, 2009). A similar theory to Maruna’s (2001) was posited by Paternoster and Bushway (2009) but places more credence on a process of cognitive change (i.e., the shedding of one’s old identity in favor of a prosocial one). This Identity Theory of Desistance (ITD) draws heavily from Maruna’s (2001) concept of a redemption script, but also from Giordano et al. (2002) theory that focuses on agency as a prime action mechanism for identity change and desistance (Paternoster & Bushway, 2009).

ITD, in contrast to Giordano et al. (2002), applies to the full distribution of

structural barriers one experiences when ready to change one's identity (Paternoster & Bushway, 2009). ITD is premised on the notion that fear of becoming an undesirable individual in the future pushes the individual to change their identity to a prosocial one. Tying one's present identity, or "working self," to past failures and possible positive and negative futures affords an individual the ability to be motivated to change one's identity to avoid a negative future. The individual, through a review of actions and consequences throughout their lives, conducts a self-risk assessment to determine the risk of an early death, more incarceration, or a desired quality-of-life level. This theory was extended by more recent research that examined the etiology of identity and desistance (Bachman et al., 2016; Liu & Bachman, 2021; Rocque et al., 2016), and continues to advance the literature on desistance. We aim to apply ITD to our sample to contextualize our findings and subsequently develop policy recommendations for reentry programs.

In addition to differences in theoretical perspective discussed thus far, critical scholars suggest that reentry providers tend to be part of the problem (Middlemass & Smiley, 2019). They argue that these interventions do little to help returning individuals become law-abiding citizens, while reentry providers benefit from a profitable "cash-cow" (Thompkins, 2010) and doing little to prevent the cycling of released persons from marginal communities and back to prison (Wacquant, 2010). Critical scholars agree that services are needed, but they argue that accountability of reentry providers is essential to ensure that the agreed-upon services are being provided with a focus on improving the overall quality of life for this population (Ortiz & Jackey, 2019; Thompkins, 2010). Academics also benefitting from these funding streams must move beyond the positivist focus on "evidence-based" programs and analyze the limitations of these efforts to overcome the structural forces contributing to the hardships of this population (Ortiz & Jackey, 2019).

### *Contemporary Reentry Programs*

Reentry programs assist individuals returning to the community from prison by providing services and making referrals designed to target various needs, including attitudes and behaviors, mental health, substance abuse, housing, education, and

employment (Mizel & Abrams, 2019). To facilitate this work, reentry administrators commonly reference the Risk, Needs, Responsivity model (RNR) for corrections (Andrews et al., 2006). This model instructs programs to prioritize justice-involved individuals for treatment programming, assign them to programming that matches their needs, and utilize their unique learning styles and characteristics to customize case management and treatment plans. RNR provides part of a strategy to address unmet needs that are correlated to reoffending. Considering recent research in education finds humans learn through a variety of styles however, a focus on unique learning styles may be unnecessary (Kirschner, 2017; Westby, 2019).

Feeney (2008) has pointed out that evaluation results regarding whether vocational reentry programs improve outcomes of interest are varied and tend to be program specific. Whereas some research has found vocational reentry programs resulted in a decrease in recidivism and an increase in employment and/or job readiness (Duwe, 2015; Seiter & Kadela, 2003), other studies result in null findings or detrimental effects from program participation (Bushway et al., 2007). Moreover, the social structural barriers that hinder significant reentry outcome improvements continue to be politically debated (i.e., employment discrimination, low wages, affordable health/mental health care) (Feeney, 2008).

The current study is part of a larger evaluation of Nebraska's Vocational and Life Skills (VLS) program, funded by the Nebraska Department of Correctional Services (NDCS). VLS focuses on reducing barriers to employment, with many program offerings and case management plans providing a foundation for improved quality of life, stable employment, and reduced criminality. Considerable research has shown that vocational trainings moderately increase employment opportunities, but rarely decrease recidivism (Lindquist et al., 2018; MacKenzie, 2012; Visher et al., 2017). However, theorists tend to consider vocational training completion as a "desistance signal" that can lead to other individual changes that decrease the likelihood of recidivism, such as increasing rational thinking patterns and interpersonal skills (Bushway & Apel, 2012). Thus, while the direct impact of VLS's employment focus may only be increased employment, it might also lead individuals to fulfill a major developmental achievement in adulthood: stable income. This allows others to view the

participant as successful—even considering past criminal activity—and therefore opens metaphorical doors to a conventional lifestyle.

## **Purpose of Study**

Much of the research on vocational reentry programs is focused on program effectiveness, while the measures that determine that success, such as employment, reductions in poverty, reductions in recidivism, and improved well-being, continue to be debated. This is partly attributed to program stakeholders wanting to know the extent to which the program achieved its goals and the program's degree of fidelity to its implementation plan. Although studies of program efficacy provide information regarding the services that "best" serve the overall reentry population, program participants are rarely given the opportunity to reflect upon and weigh-in on which processes were most instrumental within their own behavioral pathways. There is also more to learn about how individuals navigate the subjective and structural factors that play a role in the desistance process (Bersani & Doherty, 2018; Williams & Schaefer, 2021). The present study sought to address these issues by moving beyond the effectiveness of select programs to explore, by emphasizing the perspective of participants, how vocational program(s) influenced both their pathways and choices. The primary research questions included:

1. How do vocational reentry programs influence formerly incarcerated persons during the reentry process?
2. How are vocational reentry programs limited in their ability to assist individuals during reentry?

## **Method**

This project employed a phenomenological approach to understand the experiences of vocational reentry program participants in Nebraska. We collected their life stories to learn which transitional life events and personal choices were most significant to their reentry experiences. Study participants told their own stories and were not presented closed-ended questions, although probing questions were utilized to



facilitate the discussion and address key aspects of ITD. Whereas the researcher traditionally holds a monopoly on the power of storytelling when quantitative methods are adopted, our approach sought to shift the power dynamics of storytelling to the interviewee (Atkinson, 2012). The interviewer, in this case, assists the interviewee by encouraging the unique voice of the storyteller. This approach is particularly valuable given that the stories of marginalized populations are often distorted in favor of the majority, and it also illuminates the subjective experiences that provide context to quantitative evaluations of reentry programs.

### *Sampling and Recruitment*

The sampling frame for this study included any formerly-incarcerated person who completed VLS programming in the State of Nebraska. Ideally, the study participant would have also had some time to reflect on their reentry experience (e.g., six or more months post-program completion). Eight VLS reentry programs were operating in the state at the time of participant recruitment. Of those eight programs, six had operated long enough to have several participants complete programming. These six programs were included in the sampling frame.

We recruited participants by explaining the aims of the study to each program provider and subsequently requested contact information for eight participants. To lessen the likelihood of cherry-picking programs' "best" participants, we requested each provider refer four participants who excelled in programming and four who appeared to struggle in programming. We found that the participants who excelled in programming were relatively easy to contact, while the participants who struggled were more difficult to contact. Therefore, we supplemented our recruitment strategy by randomly selecting individuals who had completed VLS programming and been reincarcerated by the state. Recruitment of participants ceased when the investigators agreed that saturation had been reached and additional interviews no longer provided new information ( $n = 21$ ).

### *Data Collection*

Interviews were scheduled to occur in semi-private spaces in correctional

facilities, coffee shops, and casual restaurants. Other than coffee or a small lunch for some participants living in the community, participants were not compensated for their time. Two investigators conducted the interviews individually, but used the same interview protocol. The protocol contained open-ended interview questions, which ensured that essential information was collected from each participant and allowed the participant to portray their own narrative of how programming contributed to their reentry experience. The interviews started with a common life story open-ended question by asking “Starting from your childhood, please tell me about your life thus far?” Often, responses from this question addressed many subsequent questions on the protocol without being prompted. Other questions asked directly if not addressed by initial question responses include:

- Why do you think you got involved in the criminal justice system?
- What made you decide to participate in this specific VLS program?
- Was that programming helpful to your reentry process? In what ways?
- Do you feel like you have changed since first being in prison? How so?
- What more can the state do to help people be successful with reentry?
- How do you see yourself today?

All interviews were audio recorded and investigators took notes throughout. Demographic characteristics were intentionally collected at the conclusion of the interview in anticipation that participants would incorporate them as relevant to their reentry experience. The interviews ranged from 30 minutes to just over 2 hours. The recorded interviews were transcribed by Rev.com, which ensures a 99% accuracy rate. Quotes selected as examples in this manuscript were compared to audio recordings for accuracy by the researchers.

### *Protection of Human Subjects*

This study was conducted as part of a program evaluation of the VLS initiative, and therefore was given an Institutional Review Board exemption. However, the Belmont Report principles guided our inquiry and we sought to minimize risks and obtain

informed consent. Before each interview began, the researcher explained that participation in the study was voluntary and would not affect participant standing with corrections, parole, or VLS programs. Moreover, they were informed that their real names would not be used in any report, presentation, or manuscript. After participants confirmed they understood these conditions, they signed the consent form, and the audio recording of the interview began. Participants were provided both verbal and written copies of consent forms. There were no known risks to the participants involved in this study. Conversely, some evidence suggests that life story interviews may have many associated benefits such as gaining clearer life perspective, an increase in self-knowledge, inner peace, and a way to validate one's experience in a healing process (Atkinson, 2012).

### *Data Analysis*

The investigators employed an Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to interpret the participants' perceptions of their criminal behavior and thinking, the reentry process, and VLS programming (Larkin et al., 2006; Smith & Osborn, 2007). Considered a double hermeneutic, our IPA produced themes in the sample's life-stories by alternating between both inductive (moving from specific observations to broad generalizations) and deductive (moving from broad theory to interpretation of specific observations) approaches. The analysis was also guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis approach to ensure analytical rigor. This approach incorporates realist and constructionist paradigms, allowing themes to present themselves, but also allowing the investigators to create novel latent themes (still within the context of ITD).

Following a two-session training, two graduate research assistants reviewed transcripts, constructed thematic codes using MAXQDA software, and identified patterns consistent with ITD. Simultaneously, the coders were educated in different social science disciplines, thus they were encouraged to look for additional patterns emerging from the data with an inductive approach. After the research assistants presented their initial codes to the research team, a comprehensive list of codes was developed. Research assistants then used the comprehensive list to recode the dataset. The authors then compared the assistant coding files and began to collate codes into

broader themes that related back to the research aims. Codes that were collapsed into the broader themes had an interrater reliability of 78%, while the initial 35 codes achieved 70% agreement between coders. Cases of disagreement were recoded by the lead author.

Subsequent divergence analyses were employed to identify variation within the codes which were both planned and unplanned. For example, we examined if there were major differences in prevalence of codes across racial groups and across levels of programming success (i.e., strugglers vs. all-stars). These efforts did not yield any additional explanations to our themes. When examining why some participants did not mention a common theme or a different process within that theme, we unintentionally observed that gender and age provided a potential explanation for some of those divergent cases.

**Table 1.** Summary Participant Characteristics ( $n = 21$ ).

	Number	Mean/percent
Age	21	42.6
Gender		
Female	3	14.3
Male	18	85.7
Race/ethnicity		
Black/African American	7	33.3
Other/multiracial	3	14.3
White	9	42.9
Hispanic (any race)	2	9.5

### *Sample Characteristics*

Demographic characteristics of participants are presented in Table 1. The sample is representative of VLS participants in terms of gender and race, but slightly older than the VLS population. Potential participants who were difficult to contact tended

to be younger on average. Most participants had earned a high school diploma or GED.

## **Findings**

Themes in the life stories revealed the ways in which programming assisted individuals in overcoming structural reentry barriers such as employment and housing discrimination. Most individuals committed to a prosocial identity prior to beginning programming. After committing to lifestyle changes to overcome reentry challenges, participants reported positive reflections of their new identities. These themes, as they relate to the desistance process, are presented and discussed below with supporting quotes from select participants deidentified with pseudonyms (Table 2).

### *Ready for Something Better*

Although reentry staff and case workers generally recommend programming based on the incarcerated individual's needs, the individual ultimately must volunteer to participate in VLS programming. As Sergio put it, "You have to want that for yourself. Because if you don't, then you're going to keep doing whatever you're doing." Over 90% of our participants made concerted efforts to gain new skills and claimed to be committed to improving their lives. Moving away from a criminal lifestyle was gradual for some participants, but immediate for others. Some simply realized committing to a prosocial life-style and developing new skills was a new venture they wanted to pursue, while others spent more time thinking about their next move. Indeed, the process by which one desists from criminal behavior and antisocial attitudes is frequently similar to the process of criminogenic onset. Sometimes change requires a specific or general event, while other times inspiration from a revered individual or even a stranger can push someone over the proverbial cliff (to change their behavior/attitudes).

In response to being asked if anyone motivated or inspired them to be successful in their reentry journey, Billy said, "Myself and the things that I could have. That's basically all. . . This ain't for me." Jamie was also motivated to try something different after recidivating multiple times:

I know I got a problem. There's no sane person goes back and forth to prison,

five, six times and don't have a problem. So, I started researching things and somebody else had done WRAP [a VLS program] and they gave me their book. So, I was reading it. I was like, I think I need to do this. They were like, go, they got donuts! I was like, okay. Donuts. Don't get donuts in prison. I was like, yeah. So, I went. I learned a lot about myself. I learned what it looks like when I'm not well. What it looks like when I'm healthy.

**Table 2.** Desistance Themes Raised by Participants.

Themes	Frequency ( <i>n</i> = 21)
Ready for something better	19
Personal development	20
Selective social support	20
Gaining employment	17
Resilience and optimism	20

It appears Jamie realized her recidivism cycle was unproductive and unhealthy before learning of a relevant VLS program offering, but when she was able to read over another participant's individual workbook focused on healing from past traumas, she signed up immediately. She wanted to break her cycle of incarceration to be a better grandmother and mother. She believed the program might help her be a better role model and increase her ability to support her teenage son. Indeed, the program helped her improve her interpersonal skillsets, anger management skills, and explored the benefits of empathy in a family setting.

George had a similar experience saying, "I started looking at the fact of, where am I getting in this life? My daughter made it clear. If you continue to live the lifestyle you used to live, you will not be a part of your granddaughter's life." Billy, Jamie, and George made decisions to change for themselves, because they realized there was more to enjoy out of life by avoiding criminal behavior—and an avenue to avoid criminal behavior

was to engage in vocational programs. This is consistent with research findings that individuals on criminal trajectories must first make cognitive connections between the hardships and harms experienced with how they view themselves in the present, and then envision the type of person they want to become before behavior shifts (Bachman et al., 2016; Maruna, 2001). Derek also shared a lesson about love and compassion for others he learned when saying goodbye to his passing grandmother:

I went to the hospital, she was on her death bed and she wasn't even worried about passing. She was more worried about me, and it just really touched me. . . Like, I'm about to pass away, don't worry. I'm at peace. She was more worried about me, so it just touched me. It really like, just changed me.

The kindness and support from family members humbled and motivated participants like Derek to aspire to prosocial roles within their family and intimate relationships. The selflessness of program mentors also motivated participants to make lifestyle changes. Perhaps most importantly for readiness to change, participants reported that program facilitators assisted in the examination of one's past criminal experiences. These examinations, much like the ITD literature purports (Bachman et al., 2016; King, 2012; Paternoster & Bushway, 2009), helped participants to further their cognitive transformations regarding how to enact restraint and good intentions and refrain from behaviors that jeopardized their future quality of life and stability.

### *Personal Development*

About 95% of participants reported some type of personal development that occurred during reentry programming. In contrast to traditional correctional programming that was assigned by their caseworker or facility clinician, VLS participants were able to opt into vocational programming of their choice. For persons recently exiting correctional facilities, the personal agency to choose programming might have produced benefits over and above the intended impact of the program. Many participants chose to participate to learn as much as possible to improve their chances of securing meaningful employment. Jamie reflected on her program participation strategy saying, "Just go learn it. Put it in your toolbox. If you can't use it, then just save it for later."

Participants desired a wide variety of vocational trainings, enrolling in offerings such as OSHA, construction, and welding to expand their employment potential. While access to programs was considerable, participants expressed frustration with waiting lists due to limited seats available in classes. Others were not able to participate in programming until they were in the correctional work-release program and working full time. Therefore, many participants recommended offering *more* programs *earlier* in the incarceration period to ensure development opportunities for everyone. Reentry programs tend to be underfunded, challenging a program's ability to meet the needs of the population relative to the high quantity of individuals being released (Ortiz & Jackey, 2019). Most participants built upon their vocational training by continuing classes at a local community college after release, provided the courses were cost-free. At the time of our interviews, Ferris was taking construction management classes and Martin was working on a culinary arts degree at a community college, both funded by VLS.

Another major skill that participants gained was computer/technology proficiency. Zander, Jamie, and Paige all benefited from computer training. Knowing that the world of employment is becoming increasingly digitalized, these participants were grateful for the experience. "I didn't even know how to turn a computer on, so they taught us all that stuff," said Paige. In addition to computer trainings, most participants required a variety of basic life skills to function in a society that changes daily. Skills needed among those interviewed included managing a bank account, digital or in-person communication skills, understanding and navigating the workplace, and dealing with complex emotions that manifest publicly and privately. Participants who succeeded were able to utilize different combinations of programming to develop into the individual they envisioned.

### *Selective Social Support*

Ninety-five percent of participants reported gratitude for individuals who provided much-needed social support throughout incarceration and reentry. Sources of support included professional staff (e.g., counselors or reentry staff), peer support, and family or friends. For our participants, the most common source of social support during the reentry journey was VLS programming staff. Although social support delivery varies in scope and intensity, previous studies demonstrate that it is critically important to



participants and the overall success of reentry programs (Kendall et al., 2018; Pleggenkuhle et al., 2016).

Derek demonstrated his appreciation for program social support stating, “I really liked that about the program, more than anything. They didn’t just abandon you.” Social support was considered so valuable that Paige credited her reentry success to the people who “believed in me (her).” Cain echoed this belief saying, “There wasn’t too many people around that were believing in me, but these folks, they did, so they helped by believing in me. They lent me support.” The support and belief that they could succeed from the program helped them believe in themselves. Natalie said that when she was home alone, she relived past traumas, and being able to reach out to peer support after completing the program was incredibly valuable.

Program staff also helped participants restore personal relationships that were challenged throughout criminal onset and incarceration. About three quarters reported additional support from family or friends, but only a few participants reported having an intimate partner as a source of support. This finding is at least partially supported by one study of prison visitations that found ex-spouses were the only type of visitor that increased one’s recidivism level (Duwe & Clark, 2013). Programs provided networking opportunities and peer support intended to foster the building of new supportive relationships with “people like themselves” who could assumedly best empathize with their situation.

Learning how to develop healthy prosocial relationships was particularly important for participants who were simultaneously cutting ties with former antisocial acquaintances. Just over half of the participants discussed how they were resistant to socializing with others. Persons who participants chose to avoid included romantic partners, certain friends, people with differing life goals, “people like that,” friends who abuse alcohol or drugs, “negative people,” gang members, and “fake people.” Tony explained, “if you’re around negative people, you’re going to have that negative attitude I always try hanging out with the people that are trying to improve themselves.” Participants also reported avoiding social gatherings such as clubs and situations where confrontations might arise, such as “certain neighborhoods.” Other participants said they

prefer to stay home to avoid nearly “everybody.” This may be detrimental in the long-term, as social learning theory suggests that conventional norms are reinforced by supportive peer groups (Akers, 1998; Warr, 2002). Sometimes referred to as “knifing off” one’s past bonds, social environments, and daily routines, this phenomenon is common with desistance and can be supported with reentry programming and prison work programs (Laub & Sampson, 2003; Maruna & Roy, 2007; Williams & Schaefer, 2021).

All participants engaging in social resistance were men. These men mentioned they were hesitant to enter romantic relationships, stating the need for emotional and financial growth prior to feeling responsible for someone else. Hugo explained, “Even before I bring a female into my life, I think I need to get myself together. Let me get an apartment. Let me get a vehicle. Let me see where Hugo going first.” Isaac also wanted to focus on personal growth when he ended a committed relationship upon joining a residential VLS program. He was particularly concerned with his ability to establish and maintain boundaries with a romantic partner. This behavior is likely influenced by dominant gender norms that suggest men should be providers. Another qualitative study found that men reported being intentionally emotionally distant to maintain safety, while women reported feeling isolated and lonely (Harding, Morenoff et al., 2019).

### *Gaining Employment*

About 81% of participants expressed ways that VLS programs were able to help them gain and keep meaningful employment. These services include helping participants build a resume, providing a credible reference, assistance with finding careers with benefits (vs temporary employment), and assistance with obtaining identification documents or required equipment for employment. In Tony’s first program, he learned the differences between a “career” and a “job”—primarily that careers offer benefits, year-round employment, and can provide a more meaningful contribution to one’s quality of life. Learning this distinction motivated him to obtain training and education in construction management; and he now has life, health, medical, dental, and vision insurance, and a retirement fund.

George expressed frustration upon being told, after multiple interviews, that he could not be hired by a well-known manufacturing company because of his criminal

record. It was a major disappointment because although George completed multiple program offerings, he knew his past was the one thing he could not change. He said, "I did all this stuff in prison to change my life, but no one would give me a second chance." Distraught 1 day, he returned to the VLS program office visibly upset. Staff de-escalated George's crisis and provided additional resources to assist him in obtaining meaningful employment. The program staff member assigned to George reportedly told a potential employer that he would stake his own career on George. Now employed by that employer, George says, "My boss said that as soon as he heard that recommendation, he knew he could hire me. He came up and talked to me and now that company's grown just off of me and my best friend starting there." George would not have been employed with this company if it was not for the generous social capital of the program staff, as it is common for formerly incarcerated persons to face employment discrimination long after release (Agan & Starr, 2017; Pager, 2008).

Although George and Tony, among others, could point to specific program services that were instrumental in securing employment, some participants reported no struggles in finding employment post-release. Derek, Ethan, and Kayden believed obtaining a job was a given, and job training provided by vocational programming was unnecessary. Derek said, "But job wise. . . I got every job I ever applied for. God is good. I'll tell you all the time." Kayden believed that, although the judge that handled his case decided to make an example out of him with a DUI sentence, he had all the education and training necessary to obtain and keep meaningful employment.

### *Resilience and Optimism*

Despite past traumas and social stigma surrounding their criminal history, nearly all participants were optimistic about their future (95%). Participants believed incarceration-related challenges led them to hold more resilient attitudes in the face of change. As Derek put it, "You know, what don't break you will make you stronger." Cain reflected further on his resilient attitudes and future possibilities by saying, "I've made the most of a bad situation. I've tried to do everything the best that I could, to learn the most that I can, so that I can be happy." It was common for individuals demonstrating these resilient attitudes to also reference the role spirituality had in their transformation.

Christian values were mentioned most often but putting “positive energy into the universe” and “Karma” were also discussed. Jamie articulated how her religious ideology guided her future endeavors by claiming “I don’t want to say I’ve grown up, but I’ve grown into the woman that I want to be. Not there yet because I always say, ‘God, He’s not done with me yet.’ I’m still a work in progress.” The role of religion has long been considered important for many people’s transformation to desistance, but criminologists are still learning how effective religion is for personal transformation, as well as for whom it is most effective (DiPietro & Dickinson, 2021).

Participants observed self-compassion through mentors, peer support, and program facilitators. Many staff employed by VLS providers had been involved in the justice system themselves. They frequently served as role models to participants, demonstrating perseverance and hope of a better tomorrow. Participants frequently noted how program staff helped them to realize that they are not defined by their worst mistakes. After realizing what is possible for themselves, participants recognized their own areas of growth and opportunity and increased their dedication to the program. Participants reported cultivating their strengths while finding additional ways to manage personal challenges.

Participants were optimistic about many aspects of their lives and what was possible for their future. Their goals frequently centered on staying sober or clean and/or never returning to prison. Participants additionally hoped to restore relationships with family members and intimate partners, and achieve educational degree or career goals – particularly “being their own boss.” Some wanted to travel and enjoy their freedom. Ethan longed to see Hawaii. Future goals reported were generally ambitious, but participants believed they were within reach.

The pinnacle of resilient and optimistic perspectives in future goals was demonstrated by participants who, because of their experience, believed they could and should help others in need, more specifically individuals on similar life trajectories. This empathy was reported only among participants who were at least 40 years of age. Isaac explains:

I really believe that we go through things in our life in order to help other people. So, the things that I’ve been through in my life, I believe I was intended to go

through those things, because at some point in my life somebody's going to need help or a word of encouragement or something.

Other ways participants thought they could give back included mentoring currently incarcerated individuals, becoming a drug and alcohol counselor, and starting programs for at-risk youth. About half of the participants expressed these explicit prosocial goals. They tended to be older and likely more mature, as younger individuals expressed prosocial goals indirectly. The reasons for this were not evident in the data, but this question is ripe for future research.

## **Discussion**

This study explored two primary research questions: (1) how do vocational reentry programs influence formerly incarcerated persons during reentry; (2) how are these programs limited in their ability to assist individuals during reentry? We found that these programs encourage desistance during the reentry period by offering structured programming, case management, barrier assistance, and social support. We also found that many programs place more credence on pragmatic services and modules than they do on individual cognitive change or systematic efforts to preemptively eliminate common barriers faced by justice-involved individuals. Collectively, these findings suggested that the completion of vocational programming indirectly improves quality of life, in that *it may not only be the learned skill that reduces recidivism or improves one's chances for employment, but also the sense of agency that leads to further cognitive, interpersonal, and moral development*. The themes we found included being ready to change one's identity to a prosocial one, the journey of personal development, embracing prosocial support, gaining employment, and holding positive and resilient attitudes.

Participants committed to desistance and engaged in a reevaluation of their identity and its relevance to others in their life. They believed their lives would have further deteriorated had they not committed to changing their behavior—which is in line with ITD's notion that a perceived future self was undesirable and in need of avoidance. Interviewed participants worked closely with staff at key points in their reentry to imagine different possibilities for themselves (i.e., a future-self), and identified

opportunities for growth – following a cognitive-behavioral approach that addresses individual needs (Paternoster & Bushway, 2009). These interactions, from both ITD and participants' perspectives, were critical for participants to reflect on past, present, and potential identities of their future selves.

Participants in our study were peculiarly optimistic about what their future selves might achieve. For Paternoster and Bushway (2009), desisters appear to possess optimism, but do not believe it is essential to successful desistance. Maruna (2001) suggests that optimism and self-efficacy may be useful for sustaining desistance. Whereas Bandura (1989) suggests a positive well-being actually requires an optimistic perception of personal efficacy to overcome the multitudes of adversities, setbacks, and inequities individuals encounter throughout the life course. While most of our desistance findings are in line with ITD, our findings concur with Maruna and Bandura and suggest that optimism is important for sustaining desistance, particularly as a protective factor in overcoming structural barriers to successful reentry. Overcoming past adversities made these participants feel stronger and more equipped to help others in similar situations.

Participants appreciated the job-training skills and education classes, but few pointed to coursework alone as vital to their prosocial transformation. While evidence of a program directly changing someone's behavioral trajectory was present, it was not widespread. Rather, participants perceived the programs as valuable sources of social support and inspiration, therefore indirectly affecting behavioral trajectories. Participants credited providers who "cared," which suggests that provider empathy is a contextual component in supporting changes to a prosocial trajectory (Kendall et al., 2018). Social support provided by programming was particularly helpful for participants who had committed to desistance, but faced periods of loneliness due to their cutting of ties with antisocial peers and family members. This social support was also helpful to participants who had yet to rekindle family relationships. Cullen and colleagues suggest that social support reduces future criminal involvement by promoting cognitive transformation, fostering supportive interventions relative to punishment interventions, and helping formerly incarcerated people navigate reentry stressors (Chouhy et al., 2020; Cullen, 1994).

Our findings demonstrate that reentry programs encourage desistance in a variety of ways, but these efforts are not without limitations. The primary limitation of the programming was that it did not address structural barriers with systemic solutions outside of programming. We observed that vocational programs bolstered the training of participants as they prepared for the job market, but some still encountered considerable discrimination when employers learned of their criminal backgrounds. No program was reported to actively “move the needle” on employment discrimination. While social capital derived from programming helped individuals navigate these challenges, persistent social stigma of justice-involved individuals remains a challenge for all those released to the community (Agan & Starr, 2017; Pager, 2008). This remains a challenge because with or without programming, justice-involved individuals are typically compelled to settle for lower-paying jobs compared to those without criminal records (Western, 2006). Being required to maintain employment as a condition of work-release or parole keeps many formerly incarcerated persons in low-paying, benefit-less jobs that do little to improve their overall quality of life. While some might seek education to increase higher-paying employment opportunities, education discrimination in higher education limits this avenue as well (Stewart & Uggen, 2020).

Another programming limitation is that cognitive-based change programs provided fewer benefits than expected. While the concepts contained in cognitive-based programs are essential components to behavioral change, the mechanisms by which these components are put into action were achieved by the social support aspects of reentry programming. Working through someone’s personal challenges and barriers was perceived by our participants as vital to understanding their story, making their story meaningful, and designing a pathway to a crime-free lifestyle. The RNR model refers to this provider action as responsivity—customizing how one situationally applies cognitive-based learning modules to the individual’s distinct characteristics/identity (Andrews & Bonta, 2010). More work should be conducted on understanding this applied dynamic, so best practices may be improved and recommended to reentry programs generally (Visher et al., 2017).

### *Limitations*

The most significant limitation for this study relates to the sampling method which resulted in more “desisters” than “persisters.” This study first relied on contact referrals from program providers, and then needed to randomly select individuals who were confirmed program completers and confirmed reincarcerated. This hybrid recruitment method was a necessity due to the difficulty in connecting to “persisters.” It is possible that program providers referred the most memorable and dedicated participants, rather than a random sample of contact referrals which may have resulted in more variety. However, we found no major differences across desisters and persisters regarding the effectiveness of programming. Each conveyed gratitude to the social support provided by VLS, and no themes differed based on criminal propensity. This may be the result of our focus being evaluation of the programming over the process of desistance. Future studies should draw a random sample of completers and compare them to a random sample of non-completers (this would include individuals who did not opt-in to any vocational programming), and special attention should be made to incorporate those who are ineligible for such programming into the analysis.

Another limitation is that, although divergent cases were examined within identified themes, more nuanced analyses could be conducted to explore variation across gender, race, and age. While a larger sample would be necessary to unravel these potential differences for our research questions, we encourage qualitative and quantitative desistance researchers to conceptualize groupings of reentering individuals as intersectional identities, rather than basic categories of race, gender, and age. Such studies could illuminate how various identities face different structural and personal barriers to reentry, how groups of identities might differentially benefit from standardized cognitive approaches, and how providers customize treatment plans based on one’s group identity.

### *Implications*

Our findings demonstrate that vocational reentry programming and program staff with lived experience both inspire and bolster prosocial change. Moreover, social support provided by program staff was critical to participants committed to desistance. Our findings suggest these programs are a positive resource for some returning



individuals on their reentry journeys and should continue to be funded by the state. However, we recognize that structural barriers in society continue to make reintegration extremely difficult after a lengthy incarceration (i.e., employment discrimination, social stigma, etc.), and one program or policy solution alone will not likely meet the many challenges of successful integration post incarceration (Western, 2018). The type and extent of justice-involved challenges are a function of the interaction of population-specific needs and local social structural factors (e.g., disparity of wealth, effectiveness of social safety net, job market) plus institutional factors (e.g., urgency to address gaps in service, follow best practices, or provide services that match an individual's needs). This situation likely requires governmental action to lessen the burden on participants and program providers. However, as scholars have noted, the interdependencies among system actors makes change challenging (Ortiz & Jackey, 2019; Thompkins, 2010).

While we did not test a desistance theory specifically, our findings support ITD's notion that the path to desistance is affected by one's ability to imagine a better future. Providers used cognitive techniques in non-clinical settings to encourage individuals to develop strategies to ensure a better future. The concepts (e.g., information processing, schemata) and application methods (e.g., reframing, role playing) that providers used were taken from cognitive-based interventions and trainings, but the groundwork for individual change was conducted by the participants and providers in a case management setting. We believe these findings suggest that ITD and its related theoretical perspectives ought to play a larger role in developing reentry services currently operating, along with those preparing to launch.

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