

# Desistance and Developmental Life Course Theories

## *Research Summary*

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## OVERVIEW

This research summary is designed to help inform practitioners and others who will be involved in the Second Chance Act (SCA) Demonstration Field Experiment (DFE). The SCA DFE will provide a rigorous test of a specific reentry model intended to improve offender outcomes post-release. Some of the outcomes of interest include, but are not limited to, re-offending and re-incarceration (recidivism).

The SCA DFE model includes a multiphased intervention targeting motivation to change and other core criminogenic needs. Essentially, parole officers, community supervision officers, and service providers who have had desistance training will ultimately help offenders in the reentry process and reduce future involvement in crime. The DFE is intended to help generate new evidence about the services and programs that facilitate the successful reintegration of offenders as they return to their communities.

To outline research concerning the desistance process, this summary first presents an introduction and then investigates desistance theory in more detail. Next, the discussion is followed by empirical evidence that supports the theory. Some important policy implications are noted in conclusion.

Criminal desistance refers to the end of offending among those who have committed crimes in the past (Brame et al., 2004). Desistance is a multifaceted process that can occur among offenders who continually engage in criminal behavior. Desistance theory aims to explain why there is a dramatic decrease in the number of crimes committed after adolescence.

Several theories are outlined in this research summary, and Sampson and

Laub's (1993) theory is described in greater detail. They predict that those who have more social capital, quality marital bonds, and stable employment in adulthood are more likely to desist from committing more crime through what the authors refer to as turning points.

Empirical evidence about desistance is presented in four main areas: age, marriage, employment, and gender. Several findings from this analysis are highlighted:

- ▶ Age directly affects desistance from crime. There is great variability in when individuals desist. Eventually, the vast majority of criminals desist from crime.
- ▶ Marriage is causally related to desistance. Offenders who are married and who have better marriages are more likely to desist from crime.
- ▶ The effects of employment programs on recidivism are modest and limited. However, employment effects are stronger for older ex-offenders.
- ▶ Both men and women have similar turning points when they desist from crime. However, women participate in and commit crimes less frequently than men over time.

Some specific policy implications that stem from these findings include funding interventions with a combined emphasis on monitoring the compliance of ex-prisoners and incorporating treatment focusing on job training and employment, education, family counseling, and reconnecting individuals to the community. Programs that meet all these criteria could significantly affect recidivism. Promising programs can include residential community corrections, day reporting centers, and home confinement. Overall, community alternatives that focus on building social support may inhibit criminal behavior by reducing future offending and overreliance on incarceration.

## INTRODUCTION

Criminal desistance refers to the end of offending among those who have committed crimes in the past (Brame et al., 2004). The cessation of criminal activity can vary widely (Loeber and LeBlanc, 1990). Most theorists recognize that desistance is a multifaceted process for offenders who continually engage in criminal behavior. LeBlanc and Fréchette (1989) outlined four subcomponents of criminal desistance: de-escalation, deceleration, reaching a ceiling, and specialization.

De-escalation occurs when criminal offenders commit less serious crime than they previously had. In other words, they no longer commit violent or serious crimes, but they may commit nonviolent or property crimes.

Deceleration refers to the frequency of committing crime. For example, a person may be stealing every day for months and then over time begins to steal a couple of times a week.

*Desistance theory aims to explain why there is a dramatic decrease in the number of crimes committed after adolescence.*

A third type of desistance is when the offender reaches a ceiling in the number of crimes committed. This typology includes gradually committing more than the maximum usual amount of crime and either declining from that increase or continuing to commit the same number of acts.

The last desistance component is specialization, or when offenders become

more specialized at committing a particular type of crime so that they do it less often. For example, an individual who commits robbery frequently develops a specialized skill set related to that type of crime, and as such becomes a robbery expert. Specialization results in desistance, because an offender can narrow the types of crimes committed to those that have the biggest payoff, thus reducing overall criminal activity.

These categories are not mutually exclusive, and criminals can fit into one, two, or several of the different types. Desistance can account for a wide variety of criminal behavior that can vary over time. Most notably, desistance theory allows for crime to be measured and studied over the life course. Offending patterns over time are not captured by any other theoretical explanation. For this reason, desistance can confound research on recidivism and reentry. Termination of criminal offending can easily be conflated with one or more events that lead to reduced criminal activity, independently of any programmatic intervention (Farrington, 2007).

The importance of studying and defining desistance has only been emphasized within the literature in the last decade (Bushway et al., 2003; Nagin and Tremblay, 2005; Sampson and Laub, 2003; Sampson et al., 2006). Consequently, until the 1990s most research has defined desistance as a discrete state of nonoffending. Although the foundations of earlier theories and studies are relevant and important, researchers must use caution when applying the results of prior studies to those that encompass the dynamic life course. To determine why people stop committing crime, multiple time periods over a lifetime must be assessed to understand what is effective at reducing recidivism.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

Many theoretical frameworks attempt to explain desistance. Before discussing these frameworks, it is first essential to understand what theorists are trying to explain. Desistance and developmental theories focus on why there is a dramatic decrease or end in the number of crimes a person commits after adolescence. These life course frameworks are built from the foundations of theories that examine why people commit crime and then seek to answer why people stop.

In most cases, life course theories were framed in accordance with the same theories that seek to explain why adolescents commit crime. Some argue that crime ceases in adulthood for the same reasons it starts in youth. For example, adolescents have delinquent peers, began to commit crime, then stop as they grew into adulthood because they no longer had delinquent peers. Consequently, criminal causation and criminal desistance are therefore linked. Each competing theory of desistance will be briefly discussed before offering an in-depth investigation into the most widely supported theory of desistance, Sampson and Laub's (1993) age-graded theory of informal social control.

### Competing Theories of Desistance

The first framework is rational choice theory (Cornish and Clarke, 1986), which attempts to explain the relationship between criminal activity and long-term access to economic opportunity. This framework assumes that offenders calculate the tradeoff between the costs and benefits of committing a crime and the long-term economic opportunities in the noncriminal job market. If an offender finds that the ability to earn legitimate wages outweighs the net payoff associated with committing more crime, then that person will become less involved in criminal activity. Theories

about routine activities (Hindelang et al., 1978) also fit within the rational choice framework. These theories of crime argue that the more time a person spends with family and the longer he or she has steady employment, the less likely that person will be to commit crime.

A second theoretical framework is based on learning theory. Proponents of learning theory argue that offenders learn criminal behavior from others with whom they interact, specifically through delinquent peers (Akers, 1988; Sutherland, 1947). Supporters of learning theory argue that it is in fact a developmental theory: As people

**Criminal causation and criminal desistance are linked.**

increasingly become involved in adult relationships and work, they will spend less time with their criminal peers, which ultimately leads to less crime being committed. Personal responsibilities also increase with time, which means fewer opportunities to hang out with friends. Thus, criminal behavior is no longer reinforced through peer groups. Marriage and steady employment have a direct negative effect on time spent with peers, mediating the relationship between noncriminal and peer associations. In other words, time spent with peers has a direct effect on whether a person commits crime in adulthood.

The third framework for desistance is the developmental model (Moffitt, 1993). Proponents of this model argue that signs of persistent antisocial behavior can be detected early in life. The theory posits that two groups of antisocial youth can be distinguished based on ages of onset of conduct problems and trajectories of those problems. The two groups—life-course

persisters or “early starters,” and adolescent limited offenders or “late starters”—differ enough to require separate causal explanations. Late starters usually desist from a pathway toward crime after adolescence; early starters continue their antisocial ways throughout their lives and are likely to become career criminals. Developmental models have earned increasing attention in the field through identifying groups of offenders over the life course and tracking those groups into adulthood.

The fourth theoretical framework is the criminal propensity or latent trait model. The proponents of this model argue that a trait, low self-control, is developed by ages 8 to 10 and remains stable throughout a person’s life (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990). Self-control or lack thereof is a predisposition to impulsive behavior that causes criminality later in life. Low self-control can be remedied by good parenting skills and supervision. This framework holds that all other models that fail to account for low self-control are flawed, because this trait precedes all others and is the direct cause of criminality (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990; Wilson and Herrnstein 1985). In other words, those who have low self-control are less likely to have stable employment and are also less likely to select good marriage partners. To those who support this model, all explanations of desistance that do not account for this trait are erroneous.

The last model to be considered here is the life course or social bonding model (Hirschi, 1969; Sampson and Laub, 1993). This theory assumes that those who have weak social bonds in adolescence are more likely to be involved with crime. Proponents of this theory argue that adolescents with weak ties to society will be less likely to have quality social bonds in adulthood, unless there is a positive turning point in their

lives such as marriage, job stability, or military service. The social bonding model has had the most empirical support concerning the desistance process and will be outlined in more detail in the next section.

### **Sampson and Laub’s Age-Graded Theory of Informal Social Control**

Sampson and Laub’s (1993) age-graded theory of informal social control was an extension of Hirschi’s (1969) social bonding theory. Their desistance theory is similar to Hirschi’s model. However, the authors look at crime from childhood to adulthood and focus on individual differences and social bonds to explain onset and desistance from criminal behavior by emphasizing high-quality bonds throughout the life course.

**The social bonding model has had the most empirical support concerning the desistance process.**

Sampson and Laub predict that those who have more social capital in adulthood, such as quality marital bonds and stable employment, will be more likely to desist through what they call turning points in life. Turning points are a change or break in a person’s trajectory or criminal pathway. The occurrence of turning points or life transitions (having quality relationships with others, getting married, having stable employment, and going into the military) are likely to result in desistance from crime. Figure 1 represents how these processes lead a person either to persist and continue to commit crime or to desist from it. As noted here, Sampson and Laub (1993:224–245) outline several stages of the life course that pertain to their theory (up to age 10; ages 10–18; ages 17–25; ages 25–32; and ages 32–45).

At onset (up to age 18), both structural factors (low socioeconomic status of the family, family disruption, residential mobility, parents' divorce, household crowding, being foreign born, and mother's employment) and individual differences (difficult temperament, persistent tantrums, early conduct disorder) can affect whether a person becomes delinquent and commits crime. These factors can also affect how a person develops social ties in adulthood. As an adolescent, having poor relations with family (lack of supervision; threatening, erratic, or harsh discipline; parental rejection) or at school (weak attachment, poor performance) and having a delinquent influence (sibling or delinquent attachment) are all causal influences of juvenile delinquency.

**Those who do develop bonds will no longer commit crime because of informal social controls.**

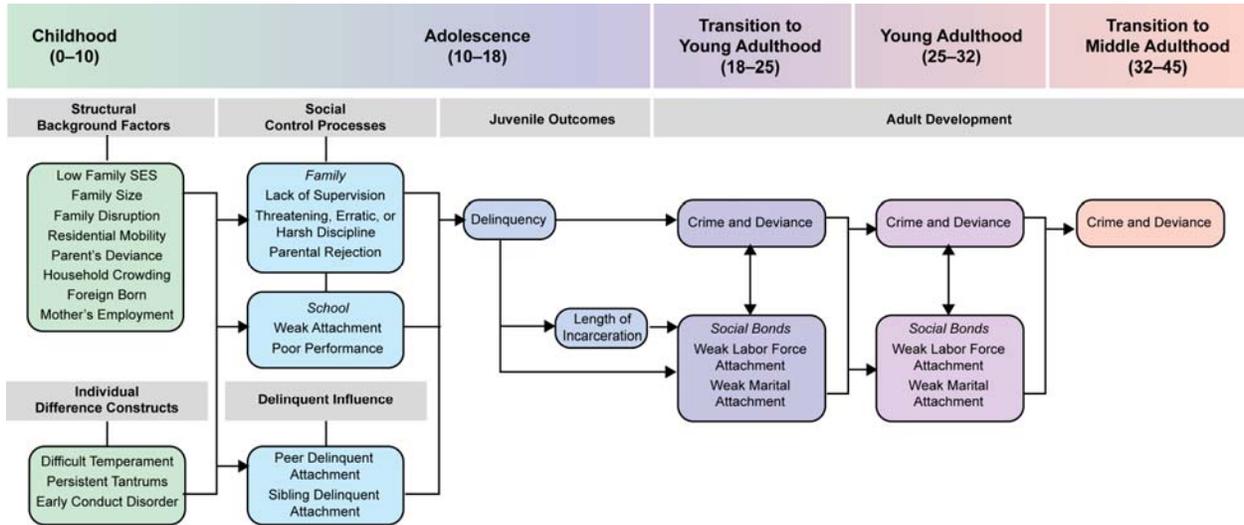
Cumulative continuity (ages 18–25) is the process by which negative delinquent activities can disrupt informal social bonds to school, friends, and family and jeopardize the development of adult social bonds. Delinquency and deviance will continue into adulthood, resulting in continued criminal behavior and weakened social

bonds. Cumulative continuity can also be conditioned by incarceration, whereby offenders internalize the label of offender (Becker, 1963; Lemert, 1951). This stigma diminishes self-worth, making offenders less likely to be productive citizens because of their difficulty in reestablishing positive bonds with prosocial institutions.

Career criminals (ages 25–45) develop because of their inability to reestablish bonds to society. Adult crime is therefore a direct result of weak attachments to the labor force and to spouses. Adult crime can also be explained by those earlier factors that caused delinquency. Desistance is this process in reverse. In other words, those who do develop bonds before adolescence, at adolescence, or in adulthood will no longer commit crime because of informal social controls. Those who desist from crime have developed quality family bonds and/or have stable employment.

Sampson and Laub (1993) use the Glueck and Glueck (1968) data to analyze their theory. The Glueck data included a matched sample of 500 at-risk youth and 500 nondelinquent boys from Boston ages 15 to 17. They were matched on age, income, race, and IQ (and also on gender, because they are all males). Sampson and Laub followed the original Glueck data and tracked the men until they were 70 years old (Sampson and Laub, 2005).

**Figure 1. Sampson and Laub’s Age-Graded Theory of Informal Social Control**



Source: Sampson, R., & Laub, J. (1993). *Crime in the making: Pathways and turning points through life*, pp. 244–245. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

To date, the Glueck study represents the longest longitudinal study ever conducted on criminals. The data included interviews, death records, and official criminal records. The researchers found that social bonds to family, school, and peers mediated the relationship between cumulative social disadvantage, personality traits, and adolescent delinquency (Laub and Sampson, 1988). Moreover, those with weak social bonds were more likely to commit crime when they were ages 10 to 17.

Since its inception, this theory has been vigorously tested in the field. While there is still debate about exactly how desistance occurs, several findings are generally agreed upon and will be discussed in the next section.

## EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

Five main generalizations have been found true by desistance researchers, using most theoretical frameworks. The first is that the prevalence of offending decreases with age; however, there is relative variability within age groups and across different types of

offenses (Steffensmeier et al., 1989). Second, the incidence of offending does not necessarily decrease with age, because for some offenders it will increase (Blumstein et al., 1988; Farrington, 1986). Third, there is relative continuity within offending:

**Five main generalizations have been found true by desistance researchers, using most theoretical frameworks.**

Those who commit crimes as adults are also more likely to have committed crimes as adolescents. In addition, the length of an offender’s criminal career is inversely related to onset, or the age at which the first crime is committed (Farrington and Hawkins, 1991; Moffitt, 1993). Fourth, despite patterns of continuity in offending, there is great diversity in criminal offending, because many offenders do not become career criminals (Nagin and Paternoster, 2000; Robins, 1978). Lastly, most researchers agree that there are

multiple pathways out of crime (Sampson and Laub, 1993).

There is also relative agreement in the field that marriage and stable employment will lead to desistance (Sampson et al., 2006). However, how and why this occurs is much debated. In the following sections, concepts related to desistance will be discussed, including the relationship between desistance and age, marriage, employment, and gender.

### Age and Desistance

As noted previously, competing theories offer various perspectives to explain why there is a dramatic decrease in offending with age. Many studies try to distinguish among and describe typical offending patterns over the life span and patterns of change in offending as well. These patterns are called trajectories or pathways. More generally, theorists seek to identify different groupings of offenders over the life course, including such subtypes as nonoffenders, early- and late-onset offenders, desisters, escalators, and chronic or career criminals. Trajectories are usually established by a range of childhood and adolescent characteristics such as low IQ, aggressive temperament, and early onset of antisocial behavior.

Specifically, the criminal careers debate has stimulated the growth of research on crime and the life course (Osgood, 2005). A widely accepted conclusion is that violent offenders have longer criminal careers than nonviolent offenders. The longer a criminal career lasts, the more likely it will include a violent offense (Piquero et al., 2007). Criminal careers tend toward diversity rather than specialization, especially those of offenders who have at least one violent offense in their criminal history (Piquero et al., 2007). While research has noted the differences in the frequency (number of

crimes) and participation (involvement) in crime among individuals, offenders tend to vary greatly by age at which they commit the most crime. In Laub and Sampson's (2003) longitudinal study of criminal offenders past age 70, their major finding was that the number of offenses committed eventually decreased for all groups of offenders. Specifically, they found that grouping offenders by type was no longer relevant for subjects past a certain age.

The most recent study that addressed the frequency of criminal offending was conducted by Petras and colleagues (2010). They used growth curve modeling to analyze data from the Criminal Career and Life Course Study, which included about 5,000 offenders and had information on criminal convictions tracked over 60 years. The researchers found essentially identical relationships for both participation in and frequency of crime regarding the subjects' age, sex, and marriage status. Specifically, both frequency of and participation in offending peaked in early adulthood and declined thereafter.

In those years where subjects had a high probability of conviction, they also had a higher probability of being convicted for a number of different crimes (Petras et al., 2010:630). Thus, there were few differences between a subject's age and involvement or frequency of criminal offending. This finding does not support the concept that there are criminal career offenders. Moreover, the analysis provides evidence for a more general but dynamic theory of crime (Petras et al., 2010:631). The findings analyzing the relationship between age and crime illustrate the following:

- ▶ Age has a direct effect on crime.
- ▶ The individual age-crime curve varies greatly, and at the aggregate level, it only represents a few offenders.

- ▶ Frequency of and participation in criminal offending are related.

### Marriage and Desistance

According to Sampson and Laub (2005:12), there are at least five mechanisms of desistance in the Glueck data that were related to marriage. Consistent with the turning-point processes noted above, marriage can potentially lead to one or more of the following possibilities in the lives of men who have committed crimes:

- ▶ A so-called “knifing off” of the past from the present, where no further criminal activity is committed after marriage;
- ▶ The potential for opportunities to invest in new relationships that offer social support, growth, and new social networks;
- ▶ Creation of direct and indirect opportunities to supervise and monitor criminal behavior;
- ▶ Reinforcement of structured routines that center more on family life and less on unstructured time with peers; and
- ▶ Marriage, which can create opportunities for identity transformation and allow for the emergence of a new “self” focused on family life (Sampson and Laub, 2005:12).

The literature that examines the relationship between marriage and desistance generally finds that married individuals are less likely to commit crime compared with those who are single (Bersani, et al., 2009; Blokland et al., 2005; Forrest, 2007; Laub et al., 1998; Laub and Sampson, 2003; McMillin, 2007; Nielsen, 1999; Petras et al., 2010; Piquero et al., 2002). Support for the influence of marriage on desistance has been found in samples of high-risk offenders (Farrington and West, 1995; Horney et al., 1995; Laub and Sampson, 2003; McMillin, 2007) and in national studies (Forrest, 2007; Massoglia

and Uggen, 2007; Maume et al., 2005; Nielsen, 1999; Warr, 1998).

Moreover, the research in this area has been extended beyond the United States and has also found support in the United Kingdom (Farrington and West, 1995; Knight et al., 1977), Canada (Ouimet and LeBlanc, 1996), and the Netherlands (Bersani et al., 2009; Blokland and Nieuwbeerta, 2005). Other research finds evidence that the relationship between marriage and desistance from crime is in fact causal (Sampson et al., 2006). Using a counterfactual approach, similar to a random controlled experiment design, Sampson and colleagues (2006) tested the causal effect of marriage on offending and found that being married leads to a 35-percent decrease in committing crime.

**At least five mechanisms of desistance were related to marriage.**

Some studies have also found that it is not just the state of marriage that reduces offending but also the quality of the bond to conventional others. For example, Farrington and West (1995) tested whether being married and having a baby were factors likely to lead to desistance. They found that both factors were significantly associated with desistance, whereas being separated from a spouse was more likely to lead to later crime. Laub and colleagues (1998) used a dynamic measure of marriage and found that it was significantly more likely to lead to desistance; however, those who married needed time to develop bonds with their spouses before desistance occurred. Additionally, Benda and colleagues (2005) found that a person with a conventional partner was less likely to be reincarcerated for a felony or parole conviction 5 years after release from prison.

The most recent study conducted on this subject found that among offenders, marriage significantly decreased both participation in and frequency of crime committed (Petras et al., 2010:626).

In summary, evidence suggests that marriage has an effect on criminal desistance and is causally related to desistance from crime. Offenders who are married and who have higher-quality marriages are also more likely to desist from crime compared with those who are single or have lower-quality marital bonds. Moreover, some evidence suggests that having quality significant others (being unmarried but in a solid relationship) can also contribute to desistance (Forrest, 2007).

### **Employment and Desistance**

Employment is central to desistance theories, because having a job reinforces social conformity (Sampson and Laub, 1993). Stable employment can lead to desistance, since offenders are more likely to experience close and frequent contact with conventional others in the workplace, ultimately becoming more likely to conform themselves (Warr, 1998). Sampson and Laub (1993:141) state that both marriage and employment transitions are “characterized by an extensive set of obligations, expectations, and interdependent social networks.” Like marriage, employment can create new situations with supervision and monitoring, as well as new opportunities of social support and a change in routine activities with the opportunity for identity transformations.

A small number of studies have found that those who are employed are more likely to desist (Benda et al., 2005; Laub and Sampson, 2003; Sampson and Laub, 1993), while other studies found that employment has no effect on desistance (McMillin, 2007;

Nielsen, 1999; Tripodi et al., 2010). In cases where offenders did commit crimes again, one study found that while employment was not associated with a significant decrease in likelihood of reincarceration, it was strongly correlated with longer time out of prison for employed offenders, compared with those who were unemployed (Tripodi et al., 2010).

**Like marriage, employment can create new opportunities of social support.**

Findings that do not support employment as a significant factor in desistance could be due to the type of measure used in the study. Most of the studies that did not find an effect used a dichotomous measure of employment indicating whether the individual had a job. The quality of the commitment to the work force is what seems to determine whether desistance will occur. In other words, how long or how much a person works matters. Research that differentiates between being employed and having full-time employment or having a quality job has shown that those who have full-time or quality jobs are less likely to recidivate (Agnew, 1986; Bahr et al., 2010; Benda et al., 2003; 2005; Greenberger and Steinberg, 1986; Heimer, 1995; Tripp, 2007; Uggen, 1999, 2000; Wright and Cullen, 2004; Wright et al., 1997).

While having job stability can lead to desistance, the effects of being employed may not last. Experimental studies of employment programs for offenders show that work effects can dissipate over time (Cave et al., 1993; Harrison and Schehr, 2004; Mallar et al., 1982). Specifically, Harrison and Schehr (2004) analyzed four vocational training programs and found that they reduced recidivism 10 to 50 percent for the first 5 years after

participants were released from prison, but their effects were minimal after 5 years.

Uggen and Staff (2001:13–15) conducted an extensive review on several work and training programs aimed to reduce recidivism and noted several findings:

- ▶ The effects of work programs are often modest and limited.
- ▶ Work, especially for older ex-offenders, was a turning point toward a more conventional lifestyle.
- ▶ Evidence supported employment programs as an avenue for reducing crime and recidivism.

**There seems to be a consistent relationship between job stability and cessation of criminal offending.**

In summary, there seems to be a consistent relationship between job stability and cessation of criminal offending. While these effects are modest over time, they may have the greatest effects for offenders who are older and for those just released from prison.

### **Gender and Desistance**

At first, most longitudinal studies examining desistance from crime have been limited to male offenders (Doherty, 2005; Laub and Sampson, 2003; McMillin, 2007; Sampson and Laub, 1993). Moreover, studies with female subjects usually “do not include sufficiently large numbers of seriously delinquent girls to provide for a comprehensive analysis” (Giordano et al., 2002:994). Recently, more studies have begun to address this deficit. Those that analyze differences between gender and

desistance find more similarities in the desistance process across gender (Baskin and Sommers, 1998; Bersani et al., 2009; Giordano et al., 2002; Leverentz, 2006; Uggen and Kruttschnitt, 1998).

For example, Giordano and colleagues (2002) used both qualitative and quantitative data to investigate desistance from crime using a sample of serious adolescent delinquents, some male and some female. Overall, findings across gender and life-course transitions were consistent. Desistance appears to be largely a nongendered process; however, some studies have noted differences in the way the desistance process occurs for each gender. Specifically, one study found evidence of important differences in the marriage effect across gender (King et al., 2007), demonstrating that marriage is negatively associated with offending for both males and females. However, after disaggregating the effects for the propensity to marry, marriage maintained only a small, significant effect for males and had no effect on females.

While there seems to be minimal variation with regard to life transitions and gender, there are gender differences when assessing participation and the frequency of offending. Petras and colleagues (2010) conducted the most robust analysis by separating the effects of offending patterns between males and females. They found significant sex differences with respect to participation in crime and frequency at which those crimes are committed (Petras et al., 2010:626). Overall, the results suggested that women participate in and commit crimes less frequently than men throughout their lives.

### **DISCUSSION**

Thus far, this research summary has outlined desistance theories, noted how desistance can occur, and highlighted what

relevant empirical research exists. Several theories were discussed, and Sampson and Laub's (1993) theory was described in greater detail. Sampson and Laub predict that those who have more social capital, quality marital bonds, and stable employment in adulthood are more likely to desist from committing further crime.

Empirical evidence was presented in four areas, including age, marriage, employment, and gender. Several findings from this analysis are highlighted below.

- ▶ Age directly affects desistance from crime. There is great variability in when individuals desist. Eventually, the vast majority of criminals desist from crime.
- ▶ Marriage is causally related to desistance. Offenders who are married and who have better marriages are more likely to desist from crime.
- ▶ The effects of employment programs are modest and limited. However, obtaining a job may be more effective for older ex-offenders.
- ▶ Both men and women have similar turning points when they desist from crime. However, women participate in and commit crimes less frequently than men over time.

Both theory and research on desistance are relatively new to the criminal justice field (Sampson and Laub, 1993). Most studies on desistance focus on the length of the follow-up period. Consequently, much more needs to be known about the desistance process. First, studies must acknowledge that desistance *is* a process. Researchers should outline the dynamics of their findings about the data and sample years that are analyzed, as they may only be applicable to those sample years. Moreover, dynamic measures of crime, marriage, and employment must be used, because these factors can change over the course of the study period. More studies should also use

panel designs in which adolescents are followed into adulthood (Farrington, 2007). Having more complete longitudinal datasets would greatly increase our understanding of the desistance process.

**. . . dynamic measures of crime, marriage, and employment must be used.**

Experimental designs are essential to understanding the desistance process. These designs allow researchers to make causal inferences about the effectiveness of certain treatments. Longitudinal designs are essential to assess which offenders are more likely to continue committing crime, which are more likely to desist, and why.

The last key issue that future research should assess is the data source needed to better understand the desistance process. Both official and self-report measures should be used to capture reported and unreported criminal behaviors. Official statistics are essential to understand the effects of offending patterns at the system level. Self-reports should be used to capture those crimes that go unreported (Farrington, 2007).

Several areas of research have yet to be explored. The first concerns the relationship between parenthood and desistance. Kreager and colleagues (2010) found that the transition to motherhood is significantly associated with reductions in delinquency and in the use of marijuana and alcohol, and that the parenthood effect is greater for women. Fatherhood also seems to be significantly associated with desistance in men (Tripp, 2007).

Studies have only begun to explore other turning points. Other areas regarding life transitions should be explored, including

(but not limited to) the role of the caregiver at adulthood; the effects of conventional coworkers and peers; the effects of military service; and negative turning points, such as length of time in prison. Moreover, while several studies have assessed different patterns or trajectories of offending, more complete datasets that study offenders through age 70 are necessary. Only lifelong longitudinal studies can determine whether these typologies are true for the greater population of offenders or just characteristic of the dataset used.

## POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Several policy implications arise from these findings. First, the evidence presented here highlights the need for policymakers to alter current policies on incarceration. As Laub and Allen (2000:24) emphatically state, “We must seriously rethink our current over-reliance on prison terms and examine the possibility that credible, strict punishments may be available in the community.”

As desistance theory notes, social control and social capital are derived from some of the most basic institutions that imprisonment harms: the family, school, and job stability. Incarcerating high percentages of offenders already damages their weak bonds to society. Incarceration may actually increase offender recidivism on release. Furthermore, incarceration has negative effects on job stability and may increase offender involvement in crime over a lifetime (Sampson and Laub, 1993, 1995).

To surmount the negative effects of prison sentences, offenders should be able to continue their education while in prison and participate in occupational and vocational programs that could improve post-release job stability (Laub and Allen, 2000:23). Programs that promote and increase opportunities to restore and reconnect individuals to schools and

training programs are essential. Specifically, programs need to effectively monitor the compliance of ex-prisoners and incorporate treatment focusing on job training and employment, education, family counseling, and reconnecting individuals to the community. Promising programs can include residential community corrections, day reporting centers, and home confinement (Laub and Allen, 2000:24–25).

**Incarceration may actually increase offender recidivism on release.**

Restorative justice strategies may also help reduce recidivism and promote desistance, specifically when working with juvenile offenders. Such techniques can allow juveniles to avoid formal sanctions and processing by participating in community conferences. The principle behind restorative justice is that both the victim and the community are harmed by crime and need restitution. The goal of these programs is to create productive, responsible members of the community by strengthening bonds to conventional social groups, emphasizing the role of the family and community, and repairing bonds damaged by the criminal act (Leverant et al., 1999; McElrea, 1996). Essentially, these interventions would help promote desistance and ultimately reduce recidivism.

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