

# Desistance from Offending in the Twenty-First Century

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## Keywords

desistance, offending, life course, mechanisms, theory, policy

## Abstract

After decades of relative obscurity, research on desistance from offending has experienced an exponential, and much warranted, escalation in attention. This precipitous growth is motivated by the timely alignment of theory, data, and method that characterized the opening of the twenty-first century. Despite the growth of the field, fundamental questions remain. This chapter provides a focused review of key twenty-first-century theoretical and methodological developments on desistance as well as a pointed discussion of critical issues. After outlining the current definitions and longitudinal trends of desistance, we discuss contemporary theories and the studies that inform these theories. We use an organizational schema situating theories in terms of the primacy with which they place structural opportunities or subjective motivations in their explanations of the transition away from offending. We conclude by presenting avenues for advancing research in the areas of definitions, theoretical testing, and bridging the research-policy divide.



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## INTRODUCTION

Seldom mentioned in criminology until the mid-1980s, the study of desistance from crime has become a prevailing theme in contemporary criminology. The rapid ascent of research on criminal desistance occurred alongside, and perhaps owing to, the growth in the availability of longitudinal data, the emergence of dynamic theories of offending, methodological advancements capable of modeling longitudinal trends, and the unparalleled expansion of the prison population, which, in combination, effectively altered the trajectory of criminological scholarship.

Several related reviews summarize the general state of research on criminal careers and desistance (Laub & Sampson 2001); correlates of desistance (Kazemian 2016, Laub et al. 2018, Rocque 2017, Siennick & Osgood 2008), such as marriage (Craig et al. 2014, Skardhamar et al. 2015) and employment (Uggen & Wakefield 2008); turning points (Nguyen & Loughran 2018); female desistance (Rodermond et al. 2016); qualitative studies of desistance (Veysey et al. 2013); and desistance from specific crime types, such as sex offending (Walker et al. 2013). In light of these existing reviews that cover the origins of desistance research, its correlates, and its relevance across subgroups and crime types, the purpose of this chapter is a focused review of key twenty-first-century theoretical and methodological developments on desistance.

We begin with a discussion of the current definitions and longitudinal trends of desistance, as these foundational facts set the stage for theoretical development. We then discuss contemporary theories of desistance using an organizational schema to highlight the comparative emphases of the mechanisms inherent in the change process of desistance. Buttressing these theories are the qualitative and quantitative studies aimed at testing and expounding theoretical propositions. We conclude by mapping out a series of lingering questions and critical issues regarding definitions and theoretical testing that we hope will motivate and invigorate new research on desistance and serve as a platform for positioning desistance at the center of timely policy-relevant discussions.

## REVIEWING DESISTANCE

### Defining Desistance

It is perhaps telling that reviews of desistance frequently start with a “what is desistance” section. As a collective, desistance scholars continue to grapple with theoretically and empirically capturing the outcome of interest. Over the past two decades, researchers have taken two distinct directions in the conceptualization of desistance: One has dominated theoretical development (i.e., desistance as a process) and the other is more often utilized in policy development (i.e., when someone has desisted).

One line of research characterizes desistance as a dynamic process whereby the reduction of offending begins far sooner than one’s last criminal event (Bushway et al. 2001, Laub & Sampson 2001, Maruna 2001). Whereas most contemporary theories agree that desistance is a process that unfolds over time, there remains much conceptual imprecision in its measurement and the distinction between one who is desisting and one who is persisting is ambiguous. Take, for example, Maruna’s (2001, p. 26) definition of desistance as a “long-term abstinence from crime” compared to Laub & Sampson’s (2001) assertion that desistance can involve a decline in the frequency and severity of offending but is not limited to the cessation of offending. Visual representations of offending trajectories have a similar ambiguity in classifying individuals with active but declining (often rapidly) rates of offending labeled as high-rate, chronic offenders (e.g., Blokland & van Os 2010, Bushway et al. 2003, Piquero et al. 2007, Sampson & Laub 2003) and qualitative classifications of persisters as those with any continued offending (e.g., Healy 2010, Maruna 2001). As a result, subjective debate concerning the nature of differences in trajectories of offending still

abounds, with little consensus regarding how much change is needed to signal that the process of desisting has begun and how much difference in offending patterns is needed to distinguish persisters from desisters.

Although it is widely recognized that desistance is not synonymous with termination, attention to the point at which one stops offending still holds relevance, particularly for policies that place someone's risk for recidivism at the forefront of decision-making. The second definitional direction focuses on statistically determining the number of years crime-free or the time to redemption before someone has desisted (Bushway et al. 2011). This approach aims to identify the point at which former offenders are statistically indistinguishable from the general population in their risk of offending. This research reveals that following arrest, a seven-year crime-free period results in statistical similarity between ex-offenders and nonoffenders (Kurlychek et al. 2007). The "time clean" for redemption varies by crime type; it is shorter for property offenders (roughly five years) than for violent and serious offenders (roughly eight years) (Blumstein & Nakamura 2009, Bushway et al. 2011). These findings provide insight into ways to distinguish those who no longer pose a risk of rearrest or alternatively those who have statistically desisted from offending.

Next, we turn to our current understanding of the trends of desistance, an area of research that operationalizes desistance as a process—the definition of desistance used in this review. We return to this definitional deliberation and its implications for the translation of theory into policy in our Advancing Desistance section below.

## Trends of Desistance

The last two decades have witnessed increasing precision in the mapping of offending patterns over the life course. Analytic advancements, including hierarchical linear modeling (Raudenbush & Bryk 2002) and group-based trajectory analysis (Nagin 2005), allow for the nuanced statistical modeling of the age-crime curve, including the dynamic process of desistance and the delineation of groups or categories of individuals. Using these methodologies, researchers have estimated the prevalence of desistance (and persistence) and the generality of the desistance process.

A few consistent findings of note from research spanning a large portion of the life course have been replicated over time and across studies, researchers, and data (e.g., Bersani et al. 2009, Doherty & Ensminger 2014, Ezell & Cohen 2005, Piquero et al. 2007, Sampson & Laub 2003). First, consistent with estimates of the aggregate age-crime curve, analyses of individual offending trajectories reveal a unimodal-offending trajectory that peaks in late adolescence and declines with age. Second, despite this general trend, there is heterogeneity in the shape (e.g., magnitude and duration) of offending trajectories over the life course. Whereas the classic age-crime curve describes the modal pattern of offending, a nontrivial number of individuals deviate from this trend, engaging more frequently in crime, initiating offending at younger ages, and/or continuing to offend into later adulthood. Third, eventual desistance from crime is the norm, even among those characterized as high-rate, chronic offenders. Reflecting on a series of recent longitudinal studies modeling offending trajectories of moderate to high-risk offenders, Sullivan (2013, p. 207) concludes "...it is clear that the natural history of offending includes a fair amount of change" (i.e., desistance). In short, desistance is pervasive.

Early studies of desistance relied upon predominantly white male samples, selectively focused on men, or statistically controlled for gender and race. The notion that the tail end of the age-crime curve might differ by race dates back to Elliott's (1994) analysis of the National Youth Survey that showed an increase in crime from the mid-twenties into the early thirties among black males; yet well into the twenty-first century, there were no additional studies of differences across race (Piquero 2008). Just a decade later, this no longer remains the case, as researchers have begun to explore demographic diversity in the desistance process.

Recent research supports the assumption of differential trends in offending with age by race early in the life course. Using data from the Pittsburgh Youth Study, Loeber and colleagues (2015) find significant diversity in the age distribution of offending across race (and gender). Followed from childhood through young adulthood, African Americans evidenced a greater magnitude of offending, for a longer duration, compared to their white peers. Summarizing research examining racial and ethnic arrest trajectories in young adulthood, Piquero (2015, p. 27) notes, “persistence seems to be more common among Blacks and Hispanics as they transition out of adolescence and into early adulthood.”

Research conducted with the Woodlawn community cohort of urban African Americans followed to age 52 (Doherty & Ensminger 2014) also reveals that arrest counts do not decline until the mid-thirties for blacks; however, estimates of the prevalence of desistance into later adulthood for this cohort are similar to the white male serious juvenile offenders who constitute the Glueck sample (Laub & Sampson’s 2003). Looking at the reduction in the number of offenders from ages 25 to 49 across samples, the prevalence in offending declined 32% for the Glueck men compared to a similar 38% decrease for the Woodlawn men. Similarly, research employing group-based trajectory analysis reveals similarity in the developmental trajectory of offending when distinguished by race and ethnicity. Longitudinal trends of arrest counts from 17 to 52 for African-American men (Doherty & Ensminger 2014), from 18 to 50 of incarcerated Hispanic men (Jennings et al. 2013), and from 7 to 27, 33, and 37 across 3 cohorts of racially diverse men (Ezell & Cohen 2005) are surprisingly similar to those found among longitudinal samples into midlife or beyond of whites with respect to shape and patterning (Blokland & Nieuwbeerta 2005, Piquero et al. 2007, Sampson & Laub 2003). Collectively, this research suggests that analyses of data censored in early adulthood may amplify racial and ethnic differences in desistance trends that dissipate when observed for longer periods of the life course.

Few trajectory studies examine female offending into adulthood. Whereas men and women exhibit a similar unimodal pattern of offending and age of decline in offending, female involvement in crime is less frequent than that of their male counterparts (Blokland & van Os 2010, Cauffman et al. 2015, D’Unger et al. 2002, Fergusson & Horwood 2002, Moffitt 2001). Also, although women tend to have shorter criminal careers, the difference in duration may be driven by the later age of onset rather than an earlier age of termination. Studying criminal convictions, Block and colleagues (2010) find a 6-year difference in the duration of criminal careers for males and females, yet the age of termination only differed by 2 years (age 41 years for the women compared with 39 years for the men). Considering race and gender together, comparing the most frequently offending black men and women from the Woodlawn cohort, Doherty & Ensminger (2014) found that the men offend at higher rates, and there is a steeper decline among the women as they approach later adulthood. Samples of racially diverse female offenders with high rates of offending that extend into adulthood remain scarce, which has hindered quantitative exploration of gender-specific patterns of desistance within and across racial lines.

In sum, recent research echoes prior statements regarding the normative nature of desistance regardless of sample composition. If desistance is defined as a process of declining offending, then desistance is pervasive. Moreover, although research reveals differences in terms of the frequency of offending across demographic groups, the shape of offending trajectories over the full life course appear similar across race, ethnicity, and gender. That said, research examining demographic diversity in offending is rare and investigation into the notion that “gender and race/ethnicity condition life course offending patterns” (Broidy et al. 2015, p. 140) as well as other dimensions of demographic diversity, including social class (e.g., Fabio et al. 2011) and immigration status (e.g., Bersani 2014), is paramount to set the stage for fully understanding the desistance process among all groups of offenders. The aging of samples from longitudinal studies capturing demographic

diversity will allow for increased understanding of the nuanced distinctions of individual offending trajectories. In these endeavors, studies need to be mindful of how social position can impact the desistance process (Potter 2015) as well as how disparities in official sanctioning could render patterns of desistance or persistence false.

## Theorizing Desistance

Theories of desistance accept as the starting point that change occurs across the life course. As discussed, even among the highest-rate offenders, the rate of offending decreases with age; yet some desist in young adulthood while others continue to offend, albeit less frequently and often less seriously, into later adulthood. Although desistance may be the norm, theories of desistance differ in terms of the causal processes motivating this change. Early theoretical development of desistance aligned with conventional disciplinary and theoretical traditions (see Laub & Sampson 2001). These distinctions are becoming increasingly blurred in the twenty-first century as contemporary theories integrate multiple factors to varying degrees, including social structure and process, identity transformation, rational decision-making, agency, and maturation.

In line with this shift, theories of desistance can be distinguished by the extent to which they give priority to structural or subjective<sup>1</sup> catalysts of change. Briefly, structural theories emphasize historical, institutional, and cultural forces that inhibit or enable individual pathways. Social context shapes an individual's capacity for action. At the extreme, structurally based theories caricaturize individuals as passive, determined, or "superdopes" (Farrall & Bowling 1999). Our reading of contemporary desistance theories suggests a less extreme position in which individuals are conceived as actors in the construction of their lives, but their actions manifest within the bounds of their social circumstances (Elder et al. 2003).

Subjective theories view the intentional, self-initiated exertion of individual actors as the impetus for change and a necessity for desistance. More than having decision-making capacity, individuals are purposeful and planful in their actions. Individuals may re-envision their past self (Maruna 2001), reconstruct their current self (Giordano et al. 2002), or fear their future self (Paternoster & Bushway 2009) to initiate the change process that underlies desistance. Our reading of these theories reveals that conceptions of individuals are far removed from those with unbounded free will, or "superagents" (Farrall & Bowling 1999), and understands them to implicate internal sources of change as the primary catalyst. All subjective theories elevate the role of the individual in the desistance process, yet they differ in terms of the weight given to structural facilitators of change and the significance of intention.

**Structural and subjective mechanisms of change.** Whereas the strict structural-subjective dichotomy is increasingly recognized as false, theories differ in the degree to which they lend priority to structural or subjective sources of change. Consequently, we array prevailing contemporary theories of desistance along a continuum that situates theories in terms of the primacy with which they place structural opportunities or subjective motivations in their explanations of the transition away from offending. Like many organizational structures of theories, this continuum is meant to serve as a broadly based heuristic device that should be viewed with the understanding that desistance theories are more fine-grained, complex, and iterative than this framework allows.

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<sup>1</sup>This distinction resurrects a deep-rooted sociological debate (e.g., Baltes & Nesselroade 1984, Dannefer 1984, Hitlin & Elder 2007) also referred to as structure and agency, external and internal, and social and subjective (Farrall et al. 2014, LeBel et al. 2008, Kazemian & Maruna 2009).

Laub & Sampson's (2003) refinement of their age-graded theory of informal social control (Sampson & Laub 1993) presents a multifaceted theory of desistance drawing largely upon social controls, routine activities, and identity change. Using extensive information from longitudinal panel data of male juvenile delinquents, supplemented by in-depth qualitative interviews with these men at age 70, Laub & Sampson (2003) find evidence that life events such as marriage, stable employment, and military service hold the potential to redirect behavior and encourage desistance by structuring time, fostering social ties and informal social control, and providing the scaffolding for prosocial identities to develop (e.g., from "hell raiser" to family man). Transitions are conceptualized as discrete short-term events (e.g., from single to married) that hold the potential for structural opportunities or new situations to emerge, which then "reorder short-term situational inducements to crime and, over time, redirect long-term commitments to conformity" (Sampson & Laub 2016, p. 327).

Laub & Sampson's (2003) theory is placed on the structural side of the continuum because, although they allow for the role of agency, this influence is secondary and is constrained by one's structural situation (i.e., situated choice). In their most recent account of the theory, they conceive of subjective inducements to change (e.g., cognitive transformation or identity change) as "below the surface of active consciousness" that does not involve "purposeful identity change" (Sampson & Laub 2016, p. 328). They characterize the role of subjective change as resulting from a series of small decisions or "side bets" that occur subconsciously, which in turn lead to desistance by default [i.e., making "a commitment to go straight without even realizing it" (Laub & Sampson 2003, p. 147)]. As a result, although intentional identity change is discussed in many of the narratives of desisters, "the developmental phase of cognitive transformation or making good is not a necessary pathway to desistance" (Laub & Sampson 2003, p. 279).

Developed from the longitudinal Sheffield Pathways out of Crime Study, with a dual emphasis on exploring individual and social aspects of desistance, Bottoms and colleagues (2004) and Farrall and colleagues (2014) present a "full interactive framework" for studying desistance. The framework incorporates individual backgrounds and characteristics (traditional risk factors for offending); social context, ranging from culture and structure to localized situations (routines and opportunities); and agency. The most recent articulation of the theory argues for a move away from theoretical competition and toward acceptance of theoretical triangulation (integration), "taking those elements of existing theories which are most useful" (Farrall et al. 2014, p. 120). Moreover, the respondents' desistance journeys depict different styles of desistance. Desisters with a history of substance use often invoked intentional change when narrating their biographies. Conversely, typical street offenders (with little to no history of substance use) exhibited little intentional self-change and instead were driven away from crime by social and personal factors such as finding the right partner or job or having children. Although this work takes a strong integrative stance melding structure and agency, it allows for the possibility that desistance can and does occur without purposeful prosocial action by individuals (Bottoms et al. 2004). Drawing on Matza (1964), this framework suggests that as individuals gradually reduce their offending they may not be consciously aware that they are engaged in the process of desisting. Bottoms and colleagues (2004, p. 371) note that, like offending, "desistance from crime might lack an absolute commitment to going straight, instead emerging gradually over time."

Whereas the notion of culture is captured more subtly in the structural frameworks of Laub & Sampson (2003) and Farrall and colleagues (2014), Carlsson (2013) has recently articulated a process of desistance that emphasizes how individuals negotiate culturally embedded schemes or expectations. Cultures imbue certain age-specific expectations that shape beliefs and behavior. The (re)integration of offenders into culturally defined normative adult life domains, such as the economy, family, and civic role commitments, is associated with, and may require, the



abandonment of criminal activity (see also Uggen & Massoglia 2003). The incompatibility of offending with cultural expectations of adulthood is developed by Carlsson with his specific focus on “doing masculinity” for doing desistance. Life history interviews with adult men present an age-contingent nature of masculinity that functions to facilitate crime in adolescence and then to constrain crime in adulthood. Carlsson (2013, p. 675) notes “To desist does not only mean to refrain from certain action. To desist—and the changes associated with it—is an attempt to take up a lifestyle characterized by law-abiding work, heterosexual monogamy, and family formation.” Successful desistance is intimately linked to engagement in conventional social institutions, as they provide socially circumscribed platforms for living up to normative expectations for doing masculinity (see also Fader 2013, Gadd & Farrall 2004).

In the tradition of symbolic interactionism, Giordano et al. (2002) first present their cognitive transformation theory of desistance drawing on data from the Ohio life-course study. Their theory lends greater weight to the role of the person in the desistance process. Important to their theory is the reciprocal relationship between the actor and the environment. Cognitive transformations, including one’s identity and desirability for crime, are embedded in and bound by available structural opportunities and constraints. Whereas an individual must be open to change and envision him/herself as a conventional actor, hooks for change (good partner, job) or structural factors assist in the maintenance of one’s new prosocial self. “. . .at a basic level, one must resonate with, move toward, or select the various catalysts for change” (Giordano et al. 2002, p. 1,000).

In a self-described rejoinder to cognitive transformation theory, Giordano et al. (2007) revise the theory to elevate emotional facets of change and continuity (see also Farrall et al. 2014, Vaughan 2007). Coupling cognitive and emotional processes, Giordano and colleagues suggest that emotional maturation occurring in young adulthood motivates desistance. The expansion of social interactions during this developmental period introduces new role-taking opportunities in which crime may cease to elicit veneration from one’s social network. These changes alter the emotional response to criminal behavior and occur alongside the development of an increased ability to manage emotions (Vaughan 2007). Emotional maturation functions as the initial stimulus to desistance.

Also emphasizing the primacy of subjective change, Maruna’s (2001) theory of desistance explores the psychosocial factors used to sustain a nonoffending lifestyle. Analyzing narratives from the Liverpool Desistance Study, he argues that desistance requires an intentional shift in one’s identity. Desisters were distinguished from their criminally persistent peers by recasting themselves as changed individuals: prior deviants who, for reasons beyond their control, were forced into crime but are now positioned to “make good” (desist) and assist others in doing the same. For Maruna, one’s criminal self provides a functional platform for desistance, but he also notes that “wanting to desist is not enough” (Maruna 2001, p. 86). Sustained desistance involves the reframing of one’s past as a stepping stone to the future and one’s true self or “real me.” Desistance is the “making” or socio-cognitive work that sustains one’s prosocial sense of self.

For both Giordano and colleagues (2002, 2007) and Maruna (2001), the willful person takes center stage in the desistance process, but structural factors take a not-too-distant secondary role. In fact, at times it appears that external structural forces may be required for, and perhaps precede, subjective change in the desistance process. Initial forays into the desistance process may be cultivated by social and environmental contingencies that provide the scaffolding for internal changes to latch onto and take flight. “The outside force removes the ‘brick wall’ but it is up to the individual to ‘take off’” (Maruna 2001, p. 96). Situational or structural circumstances, such as the separation of oneself from triggers associated with criminal behavior, may provide the momentum for the early stages of desistance, but long-term desistance necessitates a change in one’s way of thinking (Maruna & Roy 2007). Moreover, Giordano and colleagues (2002) suggest

that the capacity of cognitive transformations to foster desistance may be context dependent: inadequate in conditions of extreme deprivation and unnecessary in advantaged contexts.

The qualified importance of situational and structural context found in Maruna and Giordano's theories and the weight given to purposeful strategic action contrast with Paternoster & Bushway's (2009) desistance theory of the "feared self," which provides an anchor point for the subjective change side of the continuum (see also Paternoster et al. 2015). For Paternoster & Bushway (2009), desistance is an intentional self-change requiring a cognitive, internal shift that always precedes new social roles and opportunities. Fearing the image of what one might become if they continue along their criminal path, offenders intentionally knife off their old "spoiled identity" and replace it with a new conventional one (Paternoster & Bushway 2009; see also Vaughan 2007). Paternoster and Bushway (2009, p. 1,106; emphasis in original) explain "In the theory developed here, intentional self-change is understood to be more cognitive, internal, and individual, at least initially, with new social networks approached and mobilized subsequent to the emergence of the new, conventional identity. . . . offenders *first decide to change*. . .". The process of change is a gradual one whereby one's dissatisfactions with crime (e.g., loss of financial benefit, ominous perception of imprisonment, loss of social relationships) manifest and become linked to one's future identity; this crystallization of discontent provides the motivation for desistance (Bushway & Paternoster 2014).

### Studying the Mechanisms of Desistance

Studies of structural and subjective facets of desistance have a tendency to fall along a methodological divide. Early inquiry into desistance focused on quantitatively modeling the association between offending and structure, which is operationalized as institutional or role transitions (i.e., life events) that occur across the life course. A defining feature of twenty-first-century scholarship on desistance is the growth of qualitative desistance research and attention aimed at studying subjective facets of the change process.

**Structural.** Although not unequivocal, research continues to find that the presence of life events, particularly those of high quality, such as marriage, employment, parenthood, education, and military service, or the separation from factors, such as deviant peers, criminogenic environments, and addiction, are associated with a reduced risk of offending (for thorough reviews see Kazemian & Maruna 2009, Laub et al. 2018, Nguyen & Loughran 2018, Rocque 2017, Siennick & Osgood 2008).<sup>2</sup> In line with theories that emphasize structural inducements to change, situational transitions can function as turning points in the life course by knifing-off individuals from criminogenic peers and places, structuring daily routines, and providing informal social control. The opening decade of the twenty-first century witnessed much empirical effort levied at testing the robustness of the effect of life events, particularly marriage (Craig et al. 2014, Skardhamar et al. 2015). More recently, research has aimed at interrogating issues related to contingencies and causality.

**Contingencies.** As we have argued elsewhere (see Bersani & Doherty 2013) existing research has largely engaged in the examination of "if" life events matter; however, research is increasingly questioning where, when, and for whom do life events matter? This shift signals a recognition that although the concept of turning points has been conflated with transitions and life events, there is nothing inherent in a life event or transition that makes it a turning point. Rather, transitions

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<sup>2</sup>Given the abundance of reviews of the research on these correlates of desistance, we focus our attention on recent developments concerning contingencies and causality.



approximate an underlying process of change and hold the potential to reflect turning points in the life course (Abbott 1997). A long-standing principle of the life-course perspective is that the transformative potential of life events or transitions is contingent on biographical, social, and/or historical contexts (Wheaton & Gotlib 1997).

Examination of biographical contingencies (e.g., race and gender) has led to the investigation of whether life events matter similarly for demographic subgroups. Research suggests that, in a general sense, women, like their male counterparts, reap benefits from salient life events (see Rodermond et al. 2016), and black and Hispanic men experience reductions in offending with marriage (Bersani & DiPietro 2016a,b; Doherty & Ensminger 2013; Piquero et al. 2002). However, one complicating factor stems from research that finds that those in compromised social positions (e.g., marginalized populations) lack access to traditional life events or that when encountered, traditional life events function to undermine desistance (Giordano 2010, Leverentz 2014, Wyse et al. 2014), leaving the role of life events for these groups under question. Assortative mating suggests that offenders and/or those with substance abuse histories have a high likelihood of coupling with other offenders/substance abusers, which, although not inevitable, significantly increases the risk for reoffending (Leverentz 2014, Wyse et al. 2014). Moreover, even among those who experience salient life events, such as marriage, the benefits may not apply to those who occupy multiple compromised social positions, namely, black women (DiPietro et al. 2015, Doherty & Ensminger 2013).

Less frequently, structure has been operationalized as contextual level influences on desistance. Kirk's (2012) quasi-experimental study of the displacement of ex-prisoners following Hurricane Katrina revealed a significant neighborhood effect on offending. Individuals displaced to new neighborhoods were significantly less likely to reoffend than those who returned to their pre-prison neighborhoods. Shifting to how contexts may matter for desistance, Doherty & Bersani (2016) investigate whether the structural or subjective nature of the mechanisms of desistance is shaped by social-structural position. Results suggest that persistent residence in disadvantaged contexts may impose barriers to subjectively facilitated desistance, rendering structural mechanisms more central compared to those living in less disadvantaged contexts. Calverley's (2012) research details the importance of cultural milieu for supporting and curtailing the desistance process. Findings from a UK sample revealed that socio-structure and cultural orientations differentially shape desistance across ethnic communities. Indian and Bangladeshi offenders relayed stories of communal (re)integration and a collective responsibility for desistance, whereas desistance among black and dual heritage offenders was characterized as an individual and often isolated endeavor. Contextual differences can also be inferred in comparisons of research conducted in different countries, which suggest that life events may hold greater sway in contexts with fewer social welfare supports (compare Blokland & Nieuwebeerta 2005, Kerr et al. 2011, Kreager et al. 2010, Skardhamar et al. 2015).

Finally, structural transitions are embedded in particular historic contexts and their relevance may be shaped by macrolevel influences. For example, a by-product of the modern life course is the loosening of norms and diversification of pathways to adulthood (Shanahan 2000), which may hold consequence for the specific point effects of role transitions. Comparing distinct birth cohorts drawn from the Netherlands, Bersani et al. (2009) and Beijers et al. (2012) found that marriage exerts its strongest relationship to desistance in the most contemporary cohorts. Bouffard (2014) found evidence of historical variation among men who served in the military. Representative of period differences, men who served during the waning years of the Vietnam War reaped the strongest benefits in terms of crime reduction compared to those who served in earlier years of the war.

**Causality.** Whereas research finds crime reduction benefits accompany salient life events, the causal nature of this relationship is less certain. Does behavioral change occur prior to transitions?

Do transitions cause or accelerate desistance? To address this causal question, research has adopted increasingly sophisticated analyses including within-individual analyses (Osgood 2009), propensity score matching (King et al. 2007), counterfactual models (Sampson et al. 2006), and, most recently, a Markovian framework (Loughran et al. 2017). This work provides strong evidence that the influence of marriage and work has a causal component. However, in a series of articles, Skardhamar and colleagues (2014, 2015) offer a critical challenge to research testing the causal effect of transitions on offending, suggesting that desistance occurs prior to experiencing a life event. They draw attention to theoretical differences in the timing of transitions as they relate to patterns of offending. Analyses revealing that the desistance process is initiated prior to entering into employment or marriage are interpreted as being critical of the notion of turning points.

There exists a recurrent struggle between theory and methodology; recent history has witnessed these pivotal debates, including the interpretation of the age-crime curve to the reification of distinct groups of offenders. We leave the nuanced statistical causal debate to others (see Laub et al. 2018, Skardhamar et al. 2015) and instead consider the theoretical conceptualization of turning points as it relates to causality. As models continue to advance in sophistication, the turning point concept has been increasingly translated literally to a “point-in-time” estimate requiring abrupt directional change from an increasing to decreasing rate of offending. This makes sense as, semantically, the concept of a turning point connotes an image of instantaneous deflection in a particular pathway. However, although turning points may affect abrupt change, the influence of any transition is expected to be gradual and cumulative in nature (Hareven & Masaoka 1988, Pickles & Rutter 1989). This definitional idiosyncrasy influences the interpretation of empirical findings that assess if life events affect offending in such a way as to signify a turning point in the life course. Our reading of the literature suggests that interpretations of turning points that require redirection, such as initiating the inflection point at the apex of the age-crime curve (increasing to decreasing), take the concept of turning points too literally and falsely impose an empirical or statistical criterion to the inherent nature of change, and, in doing so, misappropriate a test of causal order as the definitive test of theory. As we make advances in dynamically modeling the life course, we need to remain mindful of the equally dynamic theoretical conceptualization of turning points (see Abbott 1997, Nguyen & Loughran 2018, Pickles & Rutter 1989) and the need to balance methodological advancement with theoretical conceptualization.

**Subjective.** Subjective facets of the desistance process are difficult to measure quantitatively. As such, research on subjective mechanisms of change is largely driven by qualitative research (for a review, see Veysey et al. 2013). Collectively, this work is refining the concepts of identity and agency and exposing impediments to subjective intent.

**Deconstructing identity and agency.** Examination into identity change and agency highlights the work undertaken by individuals to transition out of offending and reintegrate into conventional society. Former offenders often place responsibility for their desistance on themselves; however, studies suggest that a desire for change (Liem 2016), belief in one’s ability to desist (Soyer 2016), and generativity (Healy & O’Donnell 2008, Liem & Richardson 2014) are insufficient to distinguish among persisters and desisters. Instead, one’s sense of self-efficacy or personal control (LeBel et al. 2008, Liem 2016) and/or purposeful, intentional action (Carlsson 2016) may be key facilitators of behavioral change. This theme aligns with studies of the role of parole and probation in the re-entry process. Farrall and colleagues (2014) find that the facilitation of desistance by parole agents was through their influence in assisting former prisoners own efforts by providing practical advice and planning (see also Healy 2010). Desistance may be more common among former offenders who had a commitment to change along with a plan for doing so (Berg & Cobbina 2016).

Rather than a component galvanized in the end (i.e., secondary) stage of desistance (Maruna et al. 2004), King (2013b) finds that identity reconstruction is implicated in the early phases of the desistance process. Individuals experiment with noncriminal identities and cast prior offending as products of external factors beyond their control (powerlessness, dependency, lack of opportunity), yet the responsibility for future success falls to the individual (see also Liem 2016 and Soyer 2016). Whereas this divergence between external pressures and internal progress may emerge from individual narratives, successful desistance may hinge on external social networks. Social interdependencies and the reciprocity of social relationships help to shape and solidify new identities. For instance, new friendships and associations may be cultivated that support developing prosocial identities (Giordano et al. 2007, Maruna et al. 2004) and the development of conventional forms of social and human capital may provide individuals with the confidence to create clean selves (Harris 2011).

**Exposing impediments.** The contrasting portrayal of offender and nonoffender identities perverts the extent to which individuals live in both criminal and conventional worlds (see Steffensmeier & Ulmer 2005, Uggen & Blahnik 2016). Active offenders often express a desire to leave crime behind. However, aspirations for conventionality diverge from expectations that are rooted in lived experiences characterized by disadvantage and discrimination. Burnett's (2004) study of 130 male property offenders reveals sincere intentions to "do good" among most offenders that are often derailed under circumstances that are perceived to warrant crime, including necessity and addiction (see also Farrall et al. 2014, Harris 2011, King 2013b). This pattern aligns with Healy's research on male probationers showing that despite wanting to stop, "long-term goals may become temporarily sidelined" (Healy 2010, p. 176), particularly among those defined by low levels of agency. Rather than an offender/nonoffender dichotomy, identities fall along a continuum in terms of the strength of commitment to conventionality, including ambivalent (Burnett 2004) and committed (Harris 2011).

The conditioning effects of disadvantage and dependency for understanding desistance are a palpable aspect of this body of research. The persistent oppression of inequality and consequential nature of minor setbacks that severely hinder the capacity of subjective factors to foster desistance are revealed in stark detail (Fader 2013, Giordano 2010, Leverentz 2014, Soyer 2016). Addiction and trauma histories are pronounced among former female prisoners, further complicating their journey to desistance (Leverentz 2014, Sommers et al. 2004, Stone 2015). Harris (2011) found that the work to distance oneself from a criminal identity and one's optimism for a conventional future self is often derailed by a lack of structural supports. Structural barriers, not lack of intent to change, help explain "why people remain entrenched in illegal behavior" (Harris 2011, p. 82).

Although limited in number, quantitative tests that simultaneously model structural and subjective factors complement these findings. LeBel and colleagues (2008) examined 10-year post-release reconviction and reimprisonment outcomes of 130 male repeat offenders and find strong direct effects of reentry problems (i.e., housing, employment, finances, relationships, alcohol, and drugs) and stigma (i.e., perceived prejudice against ex-convicts) on recidivism risk. The effect of subjective factors, including self-efficacy (hope) and identity as a good partner/father/provider (family man), indirectly affects recidivism through reentry problems. Similarly, using data from the Rutgers Health and Human Development Project, Rocque and colleagues (2016) found that self-perceptions of identity become more prosocial through young adulthood (i.e., I'm a good person) and are significantly related to offending over time, net of controls for key socio-demographics and adult social bonds. Collectively, research suggests that structural forces and subjective intent and their interaction shape the journey to desistance yet do not determine the primacy of these interrelated factors.

## Reflections on Theory and Research on Desistance

We note two important observations in our review of theories and research on the mechanisms of desistance. First, most theories of desistance are neutral, silent, or androcentric on the question of how social identities and roles shape experiences with desistance (Potter 2015); however, analyses of contingencies and narrative accounts of individuals involved in the process of desistance suggest that current theories inadequately capture the experience of desisting for women (Leverentz 2014), people of color and ethnic minorities (Calverley 2012), and the economically marginalized (Giordano 2010) as well as those with intersecting social positions (Fader & Traylor 2015). Identifying similarities in the process of desisting has significant value; however, exploration of differences and whether gender-/race-/class-specific theories are required to accurately reflect this process are consequential for policy and practice.

Second, research on desistance theory has been in many ways compartmentalized. Analyses of structural and subjective factors fall nearly perfectly along quantitative and qualitative lines, respectively. All methods are prone to their respective biases, and these biases may shape the pattern of results. On one hand, in terms of desistance research, the “life history interview tends to generate narratives where human agency becomes a central, explanatory mechanism” (Carlsson 2016, p. 40; see also Giordano et al. 2002). On the other hand, support for structural facets seems to dominate quantitative tests, given the difficulty in measuring more subjective concepts. Beyond the compartmentalization of method, studies of structural and subjective desistance also differ in the samples used. Studies of structural facets tend to draw on cohort studies (e.g., birth cohorts and community cohorts), general population studies, or studies of juvenile delinquents over time, whereas studies of subjective facets tend to sample adult offenders in the criminal justice system (e.g., probationers and returning offenders). As such, current understanding of the desistance process may be consequent to or an artifact of data, sample, and/or method, which is something researchers should consider when drawing broad conclusions about the structural and subjective nature of desistance or when embarking on future studies.

## ADVANCING DESISTANCE

In 2001, Laub & Sampson (2001, p. 1) commented, “Although the vast majority of criminal offenders stop committing crimes, desistance is not well understood.” Despite a veritable explosion of attention relative to pre-twenty-first-century work, what we know about desistance remains significantly less than what we need to know. We end this review by presenting what we see as pressing issues for desistance scholarship.

### Stepping Back to Move Forward: Definitions Matter

Gaining an accurate understanding of the problem is the foremost priority. Despite important definitional strides, desistance still lacks a clear and consistent conceptualization. Coinciding with the growth in access to longitudinal panel data was the introduction of advanced methodology for exploiting these rich data. The relative ease of adding new time parameters and variables to multiple regression, trajectory analysis, and multilevel models is seductive and has lured most life-course criminologists, including ourselves, into increasingly advanced methodological pursuits. In doing so, as a collective, we have lost sight of definition as a priority. Our caution regarding this continued course of action is directed not at the use of advanced methodologies but at the unrelenting reliance on them and the lack of priority placed on conceptualization and operationalization. Conceptual ambiguity limits the extent to which desistance scholarship can inform and guide policy and practice. Despite widespread agreement that desistance is a process, the lack of consensus on how to

best frame the liminality between persister and desister dissolves into a kind of “glass half-full/half-empty” litmus test. Although we are not arguing for a single or universal operational definition, a renewed appreciation for the complexity of the concept of desistance and a consensus of our understanding of it is needed. We echo others who have similarly called for the consideration and refinement of the definition of desistance and of key concepts, including knifing off (Maruna & Roy 2007) and agency (Carlsson 2016, Healy 2013, King 2013a). We offer here further consideration of desistance itself, both as a process and how it relates to age.

**Desistance as a process.** What does the process of desisting look like? Is it the case that you don’t know it until you see it? Nearly two decades ago, Laub & Sampson (2001) challenged the field to address the fundamental question of defining desistance by identifying the change that underlies desistance: Does crime change? Does criminality? Does opportunity? Theories speak to changes in criminality; however, most empirical tests measure changes in behavior and use criminal counts to distinguish offender groups such as persisters and desisters. Does behavioral change manifested as a reduction in criminal acts reflect desistance? Does true desistance require a change in criminality in which one’s propensity to offend diminishes? The answers to these fundamental yet challenging questions remain unknown.

Here, we add to these questions two additional definitional considerations. First, how much change must occur to signal that the process of desisting has begun? Maruna (2001) asserts that it is difficult to determine when desistance has occurred, i.e., when people have desisted; we add that it is perhaps more difficult to determine when the process of desistance is occurring, i.e., when people are desisting. Whereas there appear to be distinct, albeit exaggerated, anchor points distinguishing those who have desisted (constant rate of maintained nonoffending) from those who persist (constant rate of maintained offending), great murkiness lies in what happens between these two points. If desistance is a process, it is likely to include periods of offending as individuals lessen their involvement in crime but have yet to fully cease offending. The observed pattern of intermittency or zigzag offending noted in the literature may be the foreground work in the process of desisting from crime or may be indicative of a persisting offender. For instance, is a person with three arrests in a year compared to eight arrests the previous year representative of someone who is desisting or persisting (see also Bushway 2013)? How much change needs to occur and for how long before we can say that the process of desisting has begun or is underway? The relative nature of involvement in crime over time poses important challenges for the operationalization of desistance.<sup>3</sup>

Second, does measuring desistance using official data (e.g., arrests, convictions) merely reflect change in criminal justice involvement? The disciplinary focus on serious offenders (those deemed as having desistance potential) and the relative ease of obtaining annualized official criminal justice contact data, as opposed to self-reported data, have resulted in a proliferation of studies modeling desistance with official data. However, this practice may be distorting our understanding of desistance, defined as behavioral change. As Bushway & Tahamont (2016, p. 375; emphasis in original) note in their review of criminal career research, “it is worth highlighting that pathways and trajectories plotted using administrative data on arrests and convictions only allow for

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<sup>3</sup>Conceptualizing desistance as a relative change can circumvent the practical problem that desistance, based on age of termination, is often dependent on the length of follow-up, sample type, and source of data. For example, leveraging published data from several community-based longitudinal samples on criminal career dimensions (Jolliffe et al. 2017), the Woodlawn study (Doherty & Ensminger 2014), and the Gluecks’ Unraveling Juvenile Delinquency sample (Sampson & Laub 2003), we calculate the average age of last offense (arrest or conviction). In general, the age of desistance increases as the length of follow-up increases. Estimates also differ based on type of sample (offender sample, general population, community cohort) and source of data (convictions, arrests, self-report).

the estimation of *criminal justice careers* rather than criminal careers.” The nonrandom process of criminal justice system contact (e.g., disparities across gender, race/ethnicity, class) and macrolevel differences across time and place (e.g., pre/post-mass incarceration and jurisdictional variation in the justice system) further complicates this issue and may drive our estimates of what desistance looks like. Thus, although examination of one’s criminal justice career has value, rooting behavioral change in administrative data risks masking desistance from offending by excluding the full spectrum of criminal involvement (e.g., hidden crime) and distorting our understanding of desistance because of disproportionate contact with the criminal justice system. The paramount importance of considering the source of data to model change parallels the need to determine the basic conceptualization of desistance itself.

Although fundamental to advancing knowledge on desistance, answering these formidable questions poses a requisite challenge to the field. We argue that the advancement of desistance research requires stepping back to reflect on what desistance is and how it should be measured. In this effort, we envision a workgroup similar to that convened by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2016) to deliberate the measurement of recovery from substance use and mental health disorders.<sup>4</sup> Revisiting the definition of desistance, in light of accumulated knowledge, can remind us what it is, exactly, that we are trying to explain.

**Age and desistance.** The concept of age, or aging, is integral to the study of desistance. Nevertheless, and perhaps in reaction to the apparent dismissal of social and psychological causal factors embodied in the statement that desistance results from the “inexorable aging of the organism” (Gottfredson & Hirschi 1990, p. 141), the ontogenetic-sociogenic debates from the twentieth-century have been cast aside in seeming favor of the prominence of sociogenic processes. In doing so, our understanding of desistance is potentially quite skewed, placing disproportionate importance on social and psychological factors (e.g., marriage, employment, cognitive transitions) to the neglect of more natural ontogenetic forces that contribute, and may be integral, to the desistance process. Dominant theories and empirical tests of desistance use age as a backdrop or modeling parameter and center on identifying causal elements of behavioral change. In this vein, scholars have been unable to explain away the direct effect of age. In a comprehensive study including 40 social covariates, Sweeten & colleagues (2013, p. 934) conclude that “age continues to have a statistically and substantively significant direct effect on crime when these factors are considered.” In light of the persistence of the brute fact that age has a direct effect on behavior, we argue for a broadening of inquiry to include the natural process of aging as it relates to behavior.<sup>5</sup> For instance, exploration into the extent to which the age-crime curve is “natural” lends way to subsequent questions such as the extent to which social factors may be facilitating or impeding this process. Stated differently, what would change look like if the environment were held constant?

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<sup>4</sup>Definitional issues surrounding desistance are similar in many ways to those grappled with in this workgroup, e.g., the translation of definitions to measurement, distinguishing reductions in behavior from behavior transfer, time to recovery, and data and methodological challenges.

<sup>5</sup>Age is not synonymous with maturation (Glueck & Glueck 1974; see also Rocque 2015). Rutter (1989, p. 2) suggests that “age constitutes a highly ambiguous variable” that must be understood through its component parts—developmental (e.g., cognitive and biological maturity) and experiential (e.g., duration and type of social experiences)—to be meaningful. In addition to the host of experiential and cognitive aspects of aging, neurochemical changes that occur naturally with age, such as changes in dopamine and norepinephrine, and that parallel the timing and pattern of the age-crime curve (see Collins 2004), as well as the interaction of biopsychosocial factors (Burt & Simons 2014), may also hold explanatory power in predicting the age-crime curve. Whereas this line of research emphasizes the physiological (i.e., functions, activities, and processes) nature of age, we draw attention to the morphological (i.e., form and structure) characteristics of age.



A greater appreciation of the natural process of aging as it relates to changes in offending over time will improve our larger understanding of desistance. First, the direct effect of aging in the desistance process is highlighted when one considers that external or internal changes that facilitate desistance are likely occurring in tandem with or after the natural process of desistance begins. If desistance is, in part, attributable to the natural processes of aging, this forces the acknowledgment of the possibility that the apex of the age-crime curve may occur prior to social determinants of desistance. We do not agree that this precludes a causal role of external or internal changes or the existence of turning points (Skardhamar et al. 2015). Rather, although theoretically identified predictors of desistance may not initiate directional change at the apex of the age-crime curve, they may accelerate desistance by amplifying the speed or intensity of the decline in the rate of offending.

Second, a better understanding of this natural process of desistance can inform the ways in which desistance is hindered. Whereas significant empirical attention has been directed at modeling factors that enhance desistance, limited attention has been focused on testing for factors that hinder the natural desistance process. Recent research implicates a causal role of the criminal justice system (e.g., arrest and incarceration) in perpetuating criminal careers (Doherty et al. 2016, Liberman et al. 2014), limiting participation in conventional society, and stifling individual action (Uggen & Blahnik 2016, Wakefield & Apel 2016). This is particularly concerning given recent trends toward the criminalization of school misbehavior, wide use of school resource officers, aggressive policing tactics such as stop, question, and frisk, and increased use of bench warrants, to name a few, which widen the net of those caught up in the criminal justice system. If desistance is part of a natural process of aging, this research suggests that intervening could have criminogenic effects.

To be clear, we do not advocate for disregarding the study of explanatory factors in the processes of desistance nor resurrecting a hands-off policy for all offenders; rather, we argue that attention should be levied at examining how social factors not only facilitate the desistance process but may also thwart the expected or natural process of desistance. In short, placing an individual's natural age-crime curve at the foreground of the conceptualization, desistance is then defined relative to one's own natural progression toward a zero rate of offending.

## Expanding the Purview of Research Questions

Research over the past two decades has greatly advanced understanding regarding the types of life events that can initiate and foster change. As we head into the next decade, we present two directions ripe for inquiry to further desistance research: investigating (a) the mechanisms underpinning the process of change and (b) the role of context in creating and facilitating change.

**Mechanisms of change.** At the forefront of desistance research is a focus on the mechanisms or processes supporting desistance, i.e., how and why desistance happens. Understanding that change occurs is not the same as understanding how or why change occurs. Qualitative research is making notable inroads in this area and continues to elucidate the diverse contours and challenges encountered across the life course that impact the desistance journey. Whereas quantitative research laid a strong foundation demonstrating that change happens across the life course, it has lagged behind in explaining how and why change happens. The current standing of quantitative research of desistance parallels Becker's (1966, p. xii) statement regarding diminishing returns, noting that it "has pursued the investigation of a few variables with ever-increasing precision but has received dwindling increments of knowledge from the pursuit." The tempering of quantitative insight as it relates to the study of mechanisms is in part due to the fact that mechanisms are unobservable and therefore difficult to capture quantitatively (Wikström & Sampson 2006). Despite this challenge, we hazard that quantitative methods can inform inquiry into mechanisms and, in combination with qualitative research, advance understanding of the process of desistance.

Using an innovative modeling approach, Bersani & Doherty (2013) and Doherty & Bersani (2016) evaluated competing theories of desistance by shifting the focus from testing factors associated with theories (marriage, identity) to considering expected theoretical outcomes. Akin to an implication analysis (see Lieberman & Horwich 2008), this research evaluated the nature of change inferred by theories of desistance. Specifically, theories were arrayed on a process-of-change continuum, capturing the relative differences in the sources motivating behavioral desistance from crime as the result of situational change (opportunities change) or enduring change (people change). Using divorce, not as an event in and of itself but as a situational “treatment” effect, results showed that crime reductions occurring while married were situational and dependent upon staying married, implying support for theories that prioritize structurally or situationally supported change.

Our attempt to adjudicate between situational or enduring processes of change is one example of research that quantitatively interrogates mechanisms, but more are needed. As an inherently interdisciplinary and multimethod discipline, we see criminology as uniquely positioned to draw from diverse perspectives to leverage methodological tools and creatively exploit data to better identify why and how desistance occurs.

**Contexts of change.** Another budding development in desistance research is the broadening of the lens beyond the microlevel and the study of individuals, their identities, interactions, activities, and social roles. Individuals are embedded in a multitude of local domains, or contexts, that shape one’s life course (Elder et al. 2003). The notion that choice and identity are constrained and structured by context is a common feature of desistance theories, regardless of their emphasis on subjective or structural processes of change. Giordano and colleagues (2002) posit that agency may be contingent on one’s level of (dis)advantage. In advantaged contexts, agency may be unnecessary (things may just “fall into place”), whereas in disadvantaged contexts agency may be inadequate to overcome conditions of extreme deprivation (Giordano et al. 2002, p. 993). Laub & Sampson (2003, p. 281) use the term “situated choice” to express how their focus on human agency lies in the “interaction between life-course transitions, macrolevel events, situational context, and individual will.” Existing scholarship indicates that context matters for desistance; however, empirical research has yet to fully exploit the confounding of context in studies of desistance, relying either on controlling away contextual effects (e.g., socioeconomic status) or selecting the sample on context (e.g., disadvantage).

We suggest a broadening of the range of contexts to fully appreciate the web of influences inherent in our daily lives. To date, researchers have identified sociohistorical, cultural, geographical, and social-structural factors as key contextual influences. The interdependency of lives (Elder et al. 2003) generated in contexts more proximal to the individual, such as household members, neighbors, and peers, likely impacts the processes of change. Most research examines the direct influence of the dyadic parent-child or marital relationship, but the immediate contexts range far beyond the dyad and can include siblings or extended family. Research suggests that beyond the marital dyad, one’s in-laws influence behavior (Andersen 2017). These relationships might exert not only indirect influences through the spouse but also direct influences on the individual. A similar phenomenon is captured in research on peers and the onset of adolescent delinquency that exposes the potential of expanding the sphere of influence to include indirect effects. Cleveland and colleagues (2012) find that substance use is least likely among adolescents in friendship groups with parents who exhibited good parenting practices. These friendship networks served “as opportunities for adolescents to be connected to a larger set of adults beyond their own parents” (Cleveland et al. 2012, p. 431). A full appreciation of the multiple contexts that are

integral to each individual can advance our understanding of desistance from both a theoretical standpoint and a policy standpoint.

## Linking Theory and Research with Policy and Practice

Current debates concerning desistance are not solely food for academic fodder; public policy hinges on spending money to bring about a specific effect. Revisiting definitions of the process of desisting holds myriad consequences for punishment practices ranging from parole revocation to “ban the box;” directed attention to the age-crime curve suggests critically evaluating criminal justice policies and their potential disruption of the natural recovery process from offending; and theoretical debate surrounding the primacy of situational and subjective factors imply different conceptions of the role of individual responsibility for change and the extent of social responsibility for crime. Based on the research presented in this review, we discuss here a few ways desistance scholarship is important for policy and practice and provide suggestions for moving forward.

First, the current convention in criminal justice policy of defining success as synonymous with termination is far removed from reality and must be reconsidered. Research repeatedly shows that complete cessation from offending does not happen instantaneously and is a lofty benchmark, particularly for those in contexts deprived of resources and prosocial opportunities (Harris 2011, Healy 2010, Leverentz 2014). Moreover, imposing a universal definition of success (i.e., termination) on all offenders discredits the success of the individual relative to his/her past. Instead, attention should be levied at appreciating within-individual differences in offending and the commission of fewer crimes, a reduction in seriousness of behavior, or both that more accurately characterizes the desistance process. Reframing the metric of successful desistance to include relative changes in offending suggests that practices such as parole revocation for technical violations likely hinder the journey to desistance by emphasizing minor violations regardless of individual successes. Additionally, accepting that desistance is a process suggests that even recent policy efforts such as zero-tolerance intensive supervision strategies [e.g., HOPE (Hawaii’s Opportunity Probation with Enforcement)] or placing time limits on criminal convictions for employment purposes remain inconsistent with the process underpinning desistance in that they require termination of offending or multiple years crime-free, respectively. Instead, policies and practices need to accept that the process of desistance is “dirty” and redirect attention away from failure (recidivism) to success more broadly defined. Efforts to recalibrate the metric of success, in turn, require a shift from identifying and specifying markers that indicate one has stopped recidivating to markers that indicate one has begun and is continuing the process of desisting.

Second, despite widespread recognition of the age-graded nature of offending, policies have focused almost exclusively on the first half of the curve (i.e., rapid escalation and peak in mid to late adolescence) to the virtual neglect of the second half of the curve (i.e., rapid decline in adulthood). Evidence documenting the pervasive pattern of desistance, even among high-rate offenders, combined with research revealing that “there is little evidence that increases in the length of already long prison sentences yield general deterrent effects that are sufficiently large to justify their social and economic costs” (Nagin 2013, p. 201) challenge the utility of invoking increasingly harsh sanctions that extend into late adulthood. Stated simply, many individuals are housed in prison facilities long after the risk of offending has waned and the crime control value of incapacitation has depreciated [e.g., close to one-third (29.5%) of the prison population was 45 or older in 2015 (Carson & Anderson 2016)]. Attention to age-graded policy as well as studies of the long-term outcomes of developmentally based reforms holds the potential to reshape the conceptions of punishment and offender. Policy analyses that directly consider the relationship between age and crime, human development, and collateral costs of punishment among juveniles

and young adults are increasing (e.g., Chester & Schiraldi 2016, Loeber & Farrington 2012), yet attention to age and crime among older adults is noticeably absent.

Third, policies and practices that focus solely on the individual, ignoring social context, and vice versa, are unlikely to produce long-term meaningful change. Theories of desistance depict divergent roles of the individual in the desistance process from one who desists by default (Laub & Sampson 2003) to one whose dedication to a prosocial self propels one into a conventional future (Paternoster & Bushway 2009). A corollary issue is how this emphasis is translated into policy decisions that focus solely on the individual (i.e., the individual's responsibility for desistance) or on structure (i.e., social responsibility for desistance) (King 2013b). However, it is unlikely that the responsibility for desistance lies solely within one or the other. For instance, research reveals widespread but wavering intentions to "do good" among most offenders that often deteriorate when faced with structural impediments (e.g., lack of employment and housing) or circumstances that may introduce perceived necessity for crime (e.g., addiction) (Burnett 2004, Harris 2011, King 2013b). Recognition of the pervasiveness of conventional aspirations combined with pessimistic expectations for fulfilling those goals can be instructive for criminal justice policy and practices such that it highlights the consequential nature of context for the realization of intentions. Indeed, programs that start from the position that criminal behavior and social context are inextricably linked, and build in conditions that separate individuals from former criminogenic people and places (see e.g., Kirk et al. 2018), may be better equipped to support intentions to desist.

Collectively, desistance research calls for a paradigmatic shift in criminal justice practices and how we "do justice." First, how we define success lies at the foundation of criminal justice policy and practice, yet this definition needs to be broadened beyond strict termination. To be consistent with the definition of desistance as a process involving the gradual reduction in offending over time, crime control efforts can build in a tolerance for temporary minor relapses of offending as individuals navigate the road from crime without sacrificing public safety (e.g., Schiraldi 2016). Second, recognition of the age distribution of offending directs attention to the fact that the process of desisting often begins early in the life course, with rapid declines in offending observed in young to mid-adulthood, limiting the utility of long sentences and incarceration for most offenders. Research on community-based alternatives and the decarceration of minor offenders (e.g., Monteiro & Frost 2015, Sundt et al. 2016) suggests that justice and public safety need not be achieved only through imprisonment. The justice system is not inherently harmful; assistance from parole/probation officers who provide access to and guidance on how to utilize resources (treatment, employment, family) can indirectly support the desistance process (Farrall et al. 2014, Healy 2010, McCulloch 2005) and nudge individuals in conventional directions (Laub 2016; see also Thaler & Sunstein 2008). Third, as the justice landscape shifts from an individual-centric model in which crime (and desistance) is the sole responsibility of the individual (Hagan 2012) to one that recognizes the stark structural realities faced by offenders, efforts to marry desistance and restorative justice are beginning to take shape (e.g., Maruna 2016).

Currently, we know very little about the impact of policy and practice on the desistance process. A report from the National Research Council (2008, p. 62) states that "Although the field has moved beyond 'nothing works' . . . it can identify with high confidence only a very few best practices for reducing recidivism and enhancing desistance." Perhaps the lack of evidence-based programs stems from the disconnect between the theoretical advancements in the mechanisms of desistance and the application to policy and practice (McNeill 2006, Weaver 2014). Ample evidence from re-entry scholarship reveals various policy- and practice-related obstacles that individuals encounter as they return home (Harris et al. 2010, Morenoff & Harding 2014, Pager 2008, Visser & Travis 2003, Western et al. 2015); however, despite significant overlap with desistance scholarship, these streams of research have developed largely independently. In sum, results from available research

suggest that to encourage desistance we need to think about not only how we define successful desistance and how offenders change but also about changing criminal justice policies and practices. In a shift toward translational criminology (Laub 2016), desistance researchers need to establish institutional linkages to allow for fluidity in the theory/research-policy-evaluation cycle to create more rational policy (Mears 2010). We are on the brink of a shift in criminal justice strategizing from deterring crime to supporting desistance; linking theory, research, policy, and practice is critical.

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