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# Chapter 21: Promoting Desistance amongst Young People

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## Introduction

'Youthful' offending is a common, and many would say natural, aspect of growing up, despite the differing theories - biological, social, cultural and political - that attempt to understand its causes in more specific terms. Across the developed world, crime and age have a strong correlation, depicted by the 'age-crime curve' which sees offending start in the early teens, peak between 16 and 18, and then decline rapidly into the early twenties (Blumstein *et al*., 1988; Farrington, 1997). But whilst the literature on youth offending has all but exhausted the reasons why young people *start* offending, there has been a dearth of literature until recently on why young people *stop* offending. This chapter focuses on that latter phenomenon, known as desistance, and in particular desistance amongst young people as they reach their late teens and early twenties. It is argued here that only in understanding young people's attempts to stop offending can practitioners help those who are becoming embroiled in offending to adopt alternative and more constructive lifestyles.

Theories of desistance are briefly described, as are the views of young offenders themselves about what helps and hinders them in that process. The chapter concludes by drawing together theoretical and practical aspects of the desistance process which

may help practitioners and others working with young people to encourage an earlier and lasting shift from offending to law-abiding behaviour.

## Theories of desistance

'Desistance', like the term 'persistence' and even 'offending' itself, is a contentious term, meaning different things to different people in different contexts. Farrington (1997) suggests that one can never know that desistance has occurred in an individual until that individual dies. Other commentators are more optimistic in suggesting that desistance can be assumed when serious criminal activity ends (Shover, 1996) or when criminal activity ceases for prolonged periods of time (Maruna, 2001; Matza, 1964). The two most commonly used means of gauging desistance, however defined, are through official reconviction data and through self-reported data. Both of these have their disadvantages, including the fact that only a minority of offenders come to the attention of the police, let alone statisticians, and that perceptions of offending by offenders themselves can often be unreliable. Thus, measuring desistance is problematic, not least when it is unclear when and for how long offending behaviour has been avoided.

Theories of desistance tend to come under one of three headings, defined here as 'individual', 'structural' and 'integrative', and these are described briefly below before exploring the views and experiences of young people who offend.

### Individual theories of desistance

Two sets of theories in particular focus on the age, attitudes and characteristics of offenders. The first set emphasises the inevitability of maturation in reducing or stopping offending behaviour in youth (Glueck and Glueck, 1940; Rutherford, 1986), but such theories tend to operate in a vacuum, devoid of external influences such as schooling, employment, relationships and the social status of young people in transition. Theories of maturational reform also imply that interventions to reduce offending may be counterproductive, given that young people will naturally grow out of crime. This argument poses difficulties not only for policy makers but also for practitioners who wish to work constructively with young people who offend, and will be discussed later in this chapter.

The second set of theories, Rational Choice theories (Cornish and Clarke, 1985), stress the decision making capacities of individuals not only to start, but also to stop offending, the latter because of possible 'burn out', the deterrence effect of the youth and criminal justice systems and/or a rational reassessment of the costs and benefits of crime, not least in the transition to adulthood. Rational Choice theories are not, however, so appropriate in explaining youthful criminal activity which is arguably more impulsive and spontaneous at a younger age – often committed as an end in itself rather than a means to an end - although it would seem from much of the research evidence that young people make more rational choices in deciding to stop offending than in deciding to start (see, for example, Barry, 2006).

**Structural theories of desistance**

The structural factors which may influence desistance mainly include social bonds, employment and marriage. Hirschi (1969) defined social bonds as having emotional

ties to others, an investment in relationships, access to legitimate activities and a commitment to the rule of law. Structural theories relating to relationships and other social bonds have proved relatively successful in understanding gender differences in the desistance process, in that young women with commitments to partners and children are more likely to desist from crime than young men. Graham and Bowling (1995) found that young women were more likely to make a successful and speedier transition to adulthood, with more opportunities for independent living and less peer pressure to offend. Young women may also have greater access to social and other forms of capital which may enable an earlier progress towards desistance (Barry, 2006; 2007a). Several theorists suggest that conventional opportunities such as marriage and employment are crucial influences in the desistance process for young people in their late teens and early twenties (Sampson and Laub, 1993; Shover, 1996), which is the most common age at which desistance occurs, but it is often stressed that it is the *quality* of such opportunities that is important in encouraging desistance, rather than the event itself (Rutter, 1996; Sampson and Laub, 1995). Relationships and employment *per se* will affect different young people in differing ways, depending on their commitment to, for example, settling down, leaving home or working for a living. Young people are also at a disadvantage in the transition to adulthood because of the instability of, for example, youth labour market opportunities, the seeming transience of peer group relationships, and limited access to social and other forms of capital at that age (Barry, 2006; 2007a).

## Integrative theories of desistance

A combination of individual and structural theories into what could be termed 'integrative' theories of desistance are receiving increasing attention, not least given

the limitations of the theories outlined above which focus on individual or structural factors in isolation. Integrative theories increasingly draw on offender narratives about reasons for starting and stopping offending, since the 'phenomenology of desistance' (Maruna, 2001: 32), from an offender perspective, can offer valuable insights into subjective interpretations of, and reactions to, events both individual and structural which may, or may not, encourage desistance.

Several theories emphasise events in the life course (Farrall and Bowling, 1999; Maruna, 2001; Sampson and Laub, 1993; Shover, 1996), or more specifically in the transition from childhood to adulthood (Barry, 2006), as having an impact on one's likelihood of choosing to continue offending into adulthood. A combination of conventional social bonds/opportunities and strengthened resolve/motivation is key to the desistance process, as are power differentials in youth, individual agency and changing perceptions of self within a social context. Indeed, young offenders themselves often cite self-motivation as the critical factor in the desistance process, although this focus on the self can often lead to the 'epistemological fallacy' described by Furlong and Cartmel (1997), where an over-emphasis on individual responsibility and self-determination without taking into account the powerful impact of existing social barriers may result in young people taking sole responsibility for their predicament. The implications of this are discussed in greater detail towards the end of this chapter.

**Young people's views of desistance**

The views and advice of young people who offend are crucial in better understanding both individual and structural theories of desistance. Thus, using the above brief summary of the desistance literature as a backdrop, two recent research studies undertaken by the author of young peoples' views and experiences (Barry, 2006; Cruickshank and Barry, 2008) are drawn on here to illustrate how they understand the process of desistance both for themselves and for other young offenders. These two Scottish studies explored the views of young people currently or previously involved in offending, asking them what helps or hinders both themselves and other young people in the process of desistance. The first study (Barry, 2006) involved in-depth interviews with 20 male and 20 female current and ex-offenders, aged 18-33, who had previously been subject to probation supervision, and the second study (Cruickshank and Barry, 2008) involved interviews and focus group discussions with 21 young men and 14 young women aged 13-21 who were currently, or were recently, looked after in residential and secure care. The focus here is confined to their perceived reasons for their own desistance and to their views about how to promote desistance in other young people.

**Personal reasons for desistance**

The young people in these two studies suggested several factors which they felt were influential in at least discouraging them from continuing offending (push factors - the negative connotations of offending *per se*), if not positively encouraging them to stop offending (pull factors - the positive influences of alternative lifestyles/opportunities). Interestingly, the vast majority of respondents cited 'push' factors when describing why they themselves stopped offending, and 'pull' factors as potential reasons why

other young people might stop offending. Most push factors could be subsumed under 'individual' theories of desistance and pull factors under 'structural' theories of desistance, as described below.

The main push factors for these young people were the 'hassle' of offending (being caught and losing their liberty), concerns about their declining health and wellbeing (resulting from drug use) and, for the older women in particular, feeling no longer able to look after their children as a result of their offending lifestyle. These were all seen as individual factors to these young people, changed only through their own resolve, agency and motivation. For those younger people in the care system, being caught had seemingly fewer repercussions than for those older people in the community (since in Scotland, those under the age of 16 are dealt with by a more welfare-oriented Children's Hearings system, known as a 'panel', whereas those aged 16 and over are dealt with in the adult Criminal Justice system):

> I knew I would get away with it because I was in a children's unit, they would take me to a panel and [I] wouldn't have to go up in front of a judge or anything (15 year old female, Cruickshank and Barry, 2008).

> You could get away with it when you're under 15, 16. You can get away with crime and that. But after that, you can't get away… it's not worth going to all the hassle of being in 'jail' (22 year old male, Barry, 2006).

Hill *et al* (2005) suggest that there is a greater escalation of offending for young people who are accommodated by dint of their living situation. Equally, for such young people, whether in residential units or secure care, the excessive and often painful use of restraint procedures by staff as a controlling mechanism can result in retaliation by young people, and there is also a tendency amongst residential care staff to resort to police involvement for often minor disturbances within the residential establishment. Thus, young people who are looked after in residential care and who pose a risk to themselves or others through their behaviour can inadvertently escalate through the youth justice system because of staff responses to such behaviour rather than be enabled to reduce their offending:

> When I was out in the streets, I didn't have people trying to hold me. It leads [you] to assault them, if they're trying to hold me then they're pushing buttons. I don't like it. I don't like getting held, so obviously I assault them' (14 year old male, Cruickshank and Barry, 2008).

> Me and other young people get hurt in restraints all the time. People who are claustrophobic getting into a safe hold would make them worse (15 year old male, Cruickshank and Barry, 2008).

Few respondents in both studies mentioned pull factors which encouraged them to desist from crime, and whilst some of the older women may have suggested current commitments to a partner or child as a pull factor, the young men tended to talk more

hypothetically about potential pull factors such as hoping to gain employment or to have more constructive things to do in their leisure time:

[My fiancé] brought a really different side out on me. He makes me relaxed, more calmer, and it's like as if I found someone who really cares and actually is interested in me, for who I really was (25 year old woman, Barry, 2006).

A lot more to do, a lot of activities in the community, a job maybe, that would take your mind off these sort of things… I never played on a swing or nothing when I was young, never had that experience (17 year old male, Cruickshank and Barry, 2008).

For the young men, reasons for desistance tended to be not only hypothetical but also more practical (alternative leisure or employment opportunities) whereas the young women's reasons were more relational, in terms of having responsibilities and opportunities to care for others, whether that be family members, their own children or law-abiding partners. The younger - and predominantly male - respondents were more likely to talk of constructive leisure opportunities rather than employment opportunities, or of having supportive relationships (with parents, peers or professionals), although relationships tended to be more important to the younger women than the younger men.

**Promoting desistance in others**

Respondents in both studies spoke of how they would help other young people to stop offending and three key approaches emerged. The most popular approach to reducing

crime and problematic behaviour in young people, mentioned equally by male and female respondents, was to offer constructive activities to reduce boredom and to give young people a stake in society, whether through leisure, education or employment:

> Give them something to do. Let people wake up in the morning and the first thing they don't think about is getting wasted. They need something to keep their mind off it, you know. They need opportunities (24 year old man, Barry, 2006).

> There was nothing to do but hang about street corners… If you put in more football parks and youth clubs in your areas, that would help you sort out offending (15 year old male, Cruickshank and Barry, 2008).

As has been seen in other critiques of young people's views of the youth justice and criminal justice system (see, for example, Barry, 2007b; Barry and Moodie, 2008; Gray, 2005; Webster *et al.*, 2004), interventions of a practical nature (for example, advice about housing, employment, education or state benefits) were preferred to those interventions that focused on surveillance or addressing offending behaviour in a vacuum. In this respect, respondents commented on the need for information and advice in respect of alcohol or drug awareness training and treatment, since much offending was seen as a consequence of, or associated with, substance misuse.

Secondly, the majority of respondents stressed the importance of social workers talking and listening to their clients about the problems, fears and consequences of offending. As one 27 year old woman said: 'I think a lot of young people really just need somebody to listen to them' (Barry, 2006). However, this important facet of the worker-client relationship was often not in evidence, not least for many young people who are looked after and accommodated, and who are subject to a myriad of professional interventions, as one 14 year old male respondent explained:

> Anger management, counselling, therapy and weekly meetings with somebody I can't remember…they just looked at you as their work, there was a paycheque at the end of it. They weren't listening to what you were saying… In therapy, that psychotherapist asks you questions and doesn't give you any advice back. It's a waste of an hour (Cruickshank and Barry, 2008).

Finally, many inferred that youth and criminal justice interventions could only be effective if they were tailor-made to suit the needs and circumstances of individual young people and were 'hands-on' rather than undertaken in a vacuum divorced from the reality of everyday life in the community. This suggests a need for interventions which can motivate young people to change through positive reinforcement, rather than for interventions which focus solely on the impact of their offending on others (Farrall, 2002; 2004). Farrall suggests that motivation to desist from crime (through encouraging and non-judgemental relationships with significant others) is more likely to aid desistance than supervision which focuses on offending behaviour and its consequences in a vacuum. McNeill (2006), amongst others, also argues that the

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relationship between worker and client is a central part of any intervention, not least because of the importance of that relationship to the client. The 'neo-correctionalist', punishment-oriented approach (Cavadino and Dignan, 2006), which increasingly and prematurely draws young people into the youth justice system, can all too often undermine the capacity and discretion of youth justice professionals to build a meaningful and proactive relationship with their clients.

## Conclusions

Given that young people tend to view their own attempts at desistance as individually negotiated and yet suggest that other young people need structural opportunities to stop offending, it is important to understand the process as combining modifications in attitude and behaviour with alternative opportunities for integration and status, based on the third set of 'integrated' theories of desistance cited earlier in this chapter.

In terms of the individually negotiated process of desistance, young people in these studies, as elsewhere, imply that workers can offer three crucial elements in reinforcing behavioural change amongst young offenders. These elements are a 'listening ear', motivation and encouragement. McNeill (2006) and others have stressed the importance of returning to a welfare-oriented approach to offender rehabilitation, where a meaningful relationship between worker and client is the basis of good listening, strengthened motivation and encouragement to change. Such a relationship needs to be built on trust and reciprocity, since young people's perceptions of authoritarianism or perceived injustice by workers can often result in defensiveness or even retaliation. Such a relationship also needs to be attuned to the

differing approaches of young women versus young men: the former tend to relate better to emotional or relational support, whereas young men often prefer practical support.

In terms of the structurally negotiated process of desistance, practitioners will need to work beyond the confines of the Youth Justice system to access opportunities (whether education, employment, leisure or family oriented) which are meaningful to young people, in order to help them to access social and other forms of capital which can give them the motivation and incentive to replace offending behaviour with more meaningful and integrative mainstream activities in the longer term. Young women's seemingly easier and earlier access to such capital has been equated with their greater likelihood of desistance from crime, compared with young men (Barry, 2006).

Although the age-crime curve suggests that young people tend to stop offending in their early to mid-twenties irrespective of any obvious outside intervention, I have argued elsewhere (Barry, 2006; 2007a; 2007b) that the point in time at which young people stop offending is closely associated with the opportunities they are afforded in the transition to adulthood. Such opportunities are equated with being trusted, being given responsibilities and being recognised as key players in mainstream (i.e., 'adult') society. It is likely that the 'limbo' effect that many young people experience in the transitional period between childhood and adulthood will be closely associated with their propensity to offend in youth, and this is the period when practitioners are perhaps best able to create constructive opportunities for change and integration.

However, the Youth Justice system on its own cannot address all the needs of young people who have offended, since it tends to focus on individual deficits in a vacuum rather than on structural constraints. Youth justice practitioners and others can only be proactive in the process of changing lives if they can work in a multi-disciplinary environment, as much as possible devoid of criminalising, stigmatising and marginalising notions of youth crime as 'problematic' and young people as 'deficient'.

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