

‘Mate, you gone legit?’: Tension and loss in status and desistance

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This article introduces the concept of *status collapse*—the symbolic and existential loss experienced by working-class men during desistance from crime. Drawing on collaborative autoethnography, the authors explore how status, as symbolic capital and embodied recognition, shapes both criminal persistence and the challenges of transitioning to prosocial life. While desistance theory has emphasized cognitive and relational change, this article highlights the underexplored cost of losing criminalized identities that once conferred meaning, belonging, and social standing. The authors develop the concept of *Desistance Habitus* to describe how symbolic capital from street and carceral contexts can be reconfigured in prosocial terrains. They call for justice interventions that offer not just relational support but meaningful status reconstruction.

Keywords desistance, status, status collapse, street capital, desistance habitus, autoethnography

Introduction

This article positions *status* as being a central component in the understanding of the desistance process. We introduce the concept of *status collapse* to criminological theory: the symbolic, relational, and existential loss that working-class men can often experience when leaving behind pro-criminal identities and entering prosocial terrains in which they may become socially invisible. While much of the desistance literature has focused on cognitive transformation, maturation, social bonds, and therapeutic support, we argue that *status*—and its embodiment as symbolic capital, or the felt sense of being *someone*—can play a critical and underexplored role.

We begin by situating our position within the evolving criminal justice landscape, grounded in lived experience and practitioner insight. We then review key contributions to desistance theory, before turning to the concept of status and its relationship with sub-

cultures and symbolic capital, particularly within street and carceral contexts. Building on this, we introduce the concept of *Desistance Habitus*: ‘a dual habitus produced from being on both sides of the desistance process which generates the ability to promote desistance pathways as a strategic tool within criminal justice practice’ to describe how embodied dispositions, values, and forms of capital acquired in criminalized environments can be reconfigured to support prosocial transitions (Brierley and Best 2025: 10).

Drawing on autoethnographic data, we explore how status operates across three dimensions: (1) how it is understood from outside of mainstream social fields; (2) how it collapses in the transition to desistance; and (3) how it might be reconstituted in ways that support identity transformation and social integration. We conclude by calling for greater criminological and policy attention to the role of status in desistance and consider how future interventions might better acknowledge what is lost, retained, and reimagined in the desistance process.

It is important to note that, consistent with the autoethnographic basis of this article and the authors’ own trajectories, the analysis developed *here* is bound to men’s experiences. We focus on working-class masculinity and its intersection with criminality and subcultural status, including how status is disrupted and renegotiated in transitions out of crime. We recognize women’s routes into and out of criminality are shaped by distinct configurations of harm, care, relationships, and identity negotiation, alongside distinctive experiences of punishment and support (Rutter and Barr 2021). Nonetheless, there remains a relative paucity of women-centred accounts in desistance scholarship (Rodermond *et al.* 2016). On that basis, we treat the argument advanced here as gender-specific rather than universal, and we hope it prompts further women-centred inquiry into the role of status and loss in desistance trajectories.

Background

As two individuals with lived experience of prison and probation, combined with practice in criminal justice, youth justice, and a range of third-sector positions, as well as academic engagement in the evolving field of criminology, we have long shared a discomfort with the seeming trajectory of narratives surrounding desistance—and, more specifically, with how the criminal justice system and its partners frame and respond to it. There is much scholarship, policy, and discourse that focuses on rehabilitation and the transition away from crime, yet we often struggle to see our own trajectories reflected in these accounts. We have, therefore, come to ask each other, what feels absent? Why does much of what we encounter seem narrow, reductive, or misaligned with our lived realities?

Maruna’s (2001) call to attend to desistance as much as onset helped establish it as a key focus of criminology. Since then, research has traced the complex, nonlinear ways people move away from crime (Farrall 2002; Weaver 2019). While early explanations emphasized cognitive or structural factors, more recent accounts highlight the role of social interaction and relational dynamics (Maruna *et al.* 2004; Barr and Hart 2022; Johns 2024). This shift has—at least rhetorically—shaped probation and youth justice practice. HMIP (2025) states, ‘the foundation and bedrock of successful probation and youth justice work can be seen as the establishment of positive, supportive, respectful and trusting relationships between individual practitioners and people on probation’. Similarly, the Council of European Probation Rules (2010) state that agencies should reduce reoffending ‘by establishing positive relationships with offenders... to promote successful inclusion’. Practitioners themselves echo this emphasis, with relational work repeatedly described as among the most rewarding elements of the role (Dominey and Canton 2022; HMIP 2025; Tidmarsh 2025).

Yet empirical evidence indicates a persistent fracture between the emphasis on supervisory relationships, and how they are experienced. Although relational practice is often positioned as ‘*instrumental* in enabling efforts to desist’ and ‘*the principal* means of supporting the journey to desistance’ (Rowe and Soppitt 2014; HMIP 2023, 2025; HMPPS 2021; Justice Select Committee 2025; MoJ 2025), research shows that people on probation rarely identify professional relationships as decisive in their desistance (Farrall 2002; Shapland *et al.* 2012). McCulloch (2005) found that while individuals welcomed support with social problems, they did not expect this from probation staff. Similarly, Barry *et al.* (2022) highlight that conditions of personal change often cut across broader social relationships and support, far beyond the jurisdiction of probation interventions.

We do not dismiss the significance of relational practice, and we recognize its value; however, we caution against *overstating* its rehabilitative significance. Elevating practitioner–service user relationships as proxies for ‘relational desistance’ risks mischaracterizing the concept, which encompasses wider social bonds—with family, peers, networks and institutions—and the ways these ties are navigated, mediated, and retooled in the construction of pro-social identities over time. An overemphasis on practitioner–client relationships or organizationally focused dynamics, to the omission of lived realities, can distort the texture and constitution of transition away from crime.

In our own journeys through prison and probation, we find it difficult to recognize claims that the conditions described above were present or significant—existing, if at all, on the periphery. Looking inwards, one of the most structuring forces was not professional relationships or interventions but *status*: the symbolic value of recognition, respect, and being ‘somebody’ in a given social world. We therefore argue that status—understood not merely as social position but as a felt and conferred form of symbolic worth—must therefore be placed within the desistance narrative, with interventions designed to reflect this and create opportunities for status to be meaningfully reconfigured and retained.

Desistance

While narrative and relational approaches have offered valuable insights into how individuals construct meaning and build supportive ties during desistance, they often overlook the symbolic cost of leaving behind a world in which one holds *status*. Our contribution centres on this gap in the current literature. Indeed, we focus not only on who the person is becoming but also on what—and *who*—must be left behind to get there.

Desistance theory has grown into a rich field of research, offering increasingly nuanced accounts of how individuals move away from persistent offending. Work on narrative identity, social bonds, and relational support has introduced powerful concepts such as *redemption scripts* (Maruna, 2001), *social integration* (Sampson and Laub, 2003), and belonging (McNeill and Schinkel, 2026) (*see tertiary desistance* (Graham and McNeill, 2017)). These frameworks have helped reframe desistance as more than the cessation of crime—it is understood as a complex and often non-linear process of identity transformation, relational connection, and social reintegration.

Whilst surprisingly scarce, there has been notable scholarly inquiry into the gendered dimensions of this identity work (Carlsson 2013; Weaver and McNeill 2015; Gadd and Farrall 2017). Carlsson (2013), for instance, argues that both persistence and desistance are shaped by shifting masculinities—often grounded in working-class contexts where toughness, control and visibility are core markers of value. The work of Carlsson (2013), Weaver (2015) and Gadd and Farrall (2017) suggests that desistance is more than a cognitive or relational shift, but one that involves an embodied negotiation of what it means to *be a man* in spaces where conventional masculinity has been historically performed through

criminal capital. This insight resonates with our argument that desistance entails a symbolic trade-off for those whose masculine identity—and corresponding status—was forged in criminal or carceral fields.

A handful of scholars have begun to gesture toward this symbolic dimension. [Nugent and Schinkel \(2016\)](#), for example, identify the ‘pains of desistance’, including the collapse of identity and social standing, while [Travis \(2005\)](#) describes how release from prison often brings not only material disadvantage but also symbolic exclusion—a kind of invisibility. These insights are critical to develop an understanding of the precarious nature of status in the desistance process.

In a contemporary context, [Bell et al. \(2021\)](#) deepen this critique by illuminating the underexplored spatial and subcultural dimensions of desistance in criminogenic neighbourhoods. They argue for ‘a broader subcultural level of analysis to be incorporated into existing desistance perspectives, if we are to fully appreciate and understand the role of macro-level processes of socialization and social control that shape desistance during reintegration’ ([Bell et al. 2021](#): 20). Their analysis underscores the importance of recognizing how place-based cultural norms, embedded identities, and spatial inequalities not only structure offending but also continue to shape—and sometimes constrain—efforts to desist.

Yet *status*—as symbolic value, social standing, or perceived significance—remains surprisingly under-theorized within this area of criminology. Where it does appear, it is often folded into broader concepts such as reciprocity, belonging or affirmation ([Weaver and McNeill 2015](#)). Tertiary desistance ([Graham and McNeill 2017](#))—the idea of new identities being witnessed, authenticated and legitimized ([Best 2019](#))—speaks to a ‘belonging to a moral community’ ([McNeill and Schinkel 2016](#): 608) and recognition. However, recognition and status are not the same. Recognition speaks to moral worth and social inclusion; status, by contrast, refers to hierarchy, comparison, and power ([Honneth 2007](#)). It is not merely about being accepted—it is about *being someone* in a given social context.

Taken together, these existing accounts illuminate key dimensions of desistance—emotional, relational, gendered and spatial—yet they have not fully developed the role of *status*, and the subsequent symbolic trade-off that can occur, as a key structuring force in shaping desistance. It is this seemingly overlooked terrain that we seek to map.

Status, symbolic capital and subcultures

[Weber et al. \(1978\)](#) defined status as a form of social honour or prestige—distinct from class or economic position—rooted in recognition by others within a shared social order. That classic understanding matters here, but we use status in a more situated and field-dependent way: as the lived condition of having a place in a social world—being legible, measurable and ‘someone’ in relation to others, even where one may sit low in the social hierarchy. [Bourdieu’s \(1986\)](#) concept of symbolic capital helps specify the mechanism through which such positions are produced and maintained. Symbolic capital refers to resources (reputations, recognized competencies, dispositions and affiliations) that acquire force because they are perceived as legitimate within a given social field. In street and carceral contexts, forms of symbolic capital such as toughness, loyalty, endurance and the capacity for retaliation can generate status as an ontological anchor inside those fields, even when those same currencies translate poorly—or become discrediting—in prosocial spaces ([Sandberg and Pederson 2011](#)).

When we first—each trying to make sense of our own journeys into and away from crime—encountered [Cohen’s \(1955\)](#) concept of ‘status frustration’, it gave language to something we had long sensed but never seen articulated. Working-class boys and young

men excluded from conventional routes to recognition—education, employment and middle-class success—do not simply accept failure or withdraw. Instead, some reject the legitimacy of that social field altogether and construct alternative value systems. Within these subcultural spaces, defiance, risk, and toughness are not pathologies to be corrected but currencies to be traded. Crime, in this context, can become a way of claiming respect and crafting an identity.

Cohen's (1955) observations struck a deep chord—exposing a nerve that had long gone unnamed in our own experiences. Though he was writing about delinquent boys in the 1950s, the broader point endures: that through necessity, exclusion breeds inversion—cultures with their own objectives, incentives, rewards and validation. As Young (1999) describes, the 'exclusive society' creates new symbolic orders, where structural inequality fosters cultural rebellion and alternative value systems: what mainstream society finds distasteful can become a source of pride for those on the margins, offering recognition and, through that, status; in such contexts, with limited economic and political capital, status often becomes the primary means of asserting identity, value and influence (Milner 1994).

Street and prison cultures

In many contemporary working-class contexts—particularly those shaped by persistent poverty and social marginalization—young people, especially young men, often neither perceive nor value conventional pathways to success (Willis, 2017). As MacDonald and Marsh (2005) note, these individuals are not merely disengaged or apathetic but frequently develop alternative aspirations in response to structural constraints. Rather than reflecting a 'poverty of ambition', this disinvestment can be seen as a rational adaptation to exclusionary social structures that render conventional success routes inaccessible or culturally irrelevant. In these contexts, prolonged exclusion reshapes what is considered meaningful, possible, or worthy of pursuit.

Street culture—often rooted in criminal economies, council estates, and hyper-masculine peer groups in the United Kingdom (Ellis *et al.* 2017)—mirrors the inverted value systems Cohen described decades ago. Within these contexts, legitimacy is reconfigured, and resistance to dominant norms becomes a source of recognition. Anderson's Code of the Street (2000, United States), Sandberg and Pedersen's Street Capital (2011, Norway) and Fraser's Street Habitus (2013, Scotland) each illustrate how alternative social fields form in response to systemic exclusion. Within these fields, acts of defiance, hypermasculinity and violence are often recoded as legitimate routes to respect, identity and recognition—directly opposing dominant moral and institutional norms (Anderson 2000; Sandberg and Pedersen 2011; Fraser 2013). In a UK context, Ilan (2015) describes how urban street social capital, shaped by liquid modernity, drives youth toward informal economies and performative status, while Reynolds (2013) highlights how Black youths in inner-city London construct 'black neighbourhoods' as social capital resources, forging identity and cohesion through shared cultural codes in the face of systemic exclusion. In such spaces, serious violence may be admired, legitimate employment derided and cooperation with authorities actively discouraged—not solely as acts of defiance, but as violations of a deeply internalized moral code rooted in place, race, and class-based marginalization.

Perhaps, nowhere is the role of status as a structuring force more visible than inside prison. Prison functions as a kind of hyper-subculture—an intensified extension of 'the street': a compressed, high-stakes social world with its own hierarchies, norms, and logic (Crewe, 2009; Liebling, 2011). Whilst characterized by hypervigilance, anxiety and violence (Dennehy, 2023), it remains a space where people can still 'be somebody' (Liebling,

2011), establishing position, recognition, validation and meaning within a clearly structured order. For those already excluded elsewhere, prison may offer a rare arena in which symbolic identity can be actively inhabited and defended and where hierarchy meets deep relational and existential needs (Sandberg, 2008). By understanding how such thinking generates symbolic capital and localized forms of status across street and carceral terrains, we can better explore how these dynamics might be disrupted or redirected—crucially, as a foundation for understanding desistance.

Methods: Why the criminalized voice?

Autoethnography has developed within criminology as a method for bringing proximity, emotion, biography and texture into the analysis of criminalized worlds in ways that are reflexive and conceptually accountable (Anderson 2006; Jewkes 2012; Wakeman 2014; Ferrell 2018). Alongside this, a broader shift in the social sciences has increasingly sought to integrate, explore and amplify lived experience as a site of legitimate criminological knowledge production (Antojado and McPhee 2025). Within that wider methodological and epistemological shift, movements such as ‘convict criminology’ have played a pivotal role in legitimizing previously incarcerated scholars as contributors to criminological knowledge, and in creating space for researchers to draw on personal histories and cultural proximity to interrogate broader social phenomena (Richards and Ross 2001; Aresti *et al.* 2012; Ross *et al.* 2014).

Autoethnography is a qualitative research method that ‘uses the researcher’s personal experience to describe and critique cultural beliefs, practices and experiences’ (Ellis *et al.* 2011). As such, it is well-suited to interrogating the emotional, psychological, and social dimensions of both criminality and desistance from crime—dimensions that have often been neglected or ignored in mainstream criminology (Earle 2016).

We approach this article through an analytic autoethnographic orientation (Anderson 2006; Wakeman 2018), where the purpose is not simply to document personal experience or evoke resonance, but to use experiential material to refine concepts and ask wider critical questions about the social worlds under examination. As Anderson (2006: 387) argues, autoethnography should involve ‘data-transcending practices... directed toward theoretical development, refinement and extension’, and criminological autoethnography has similarly emphasized critical analysis rather than confession (Wakeman 2018).

While autoethnography has drawn criticism—particularly for its lack of generalizability and difficulty in anchoring personal narratives in broader theoretical frameworks (Reed-Danahay 2021)—we view it as a powerful and underutilized tool in criminological inquiry. Bunn (2023: 1563) has highlighted the ‘privilege of distance’ often held by academic researchers who study criminalized populations from afar. In response, we advocate for what Brierley and Best (2025) outline as the ‘privilege of insight’ afforded by those who have lived through the phenomena of criminality and desistance contributing to the literature. This is not to dismiss the value of outsider perspectives, but to address the epistemological gaps that can occur when the experiences of those most affected by crime and punishment are excluded from research. It offers a valuable epistemological lens for exploring the authentic, subjective realities and identity transformations often obscured in dominant narratives of criminological enquiry (Hart and Healy 2018; Honeywell, 2023), something we believe can—at times—sanitize the harsh realities of crime and desistance.

Developed over approximately 3 years, with the core writing and analysis conducted over around 1 year, our material comprised eight audio-recorded phone conversations, which were listened back to and transcribed, alongside written reflective pieces produced separately and shared between the authors. Some reflections were developed iteratively across

exchanges, while others prompted focused analytic discussions as the article took shape. Conversations were loosely structured around key points on the criminality–desistance trajectory (e.g. childhood and early identity formation, street and prison worlds, turning points, early desistance, work and legitimacy, low points and high points) and were used to generate detailed scenes through which status, recognition, and belonging could be examined. Analysis proceeded iteratively and collaboratively: recurring scenes and pressures were returned to and compared across transcripts and reflections, analysed through our conceptual terms (status, field, symbolic capital and habitus), and refined through successive drafting and disagreement, with divergences treated as analytic prompts rather than noise.

This article uses collaborative autoethnography to move beyond isolated storytelling and toward co-analysis. Alongside the recorded and transcribed conversations, we wrote reflective pieces independently and then used dialogue, mutual probing and disagreement to interrogate how legitimacy, loss of status, and social reintegration were experienced and narrated. In (Chang 2013) terms, the account is a ‘co-constructed narrative’, produced through iterative challenge and refinement rather than a single authorial voice. From here on, we write using our first names to invite the reader into our experiences more intimately.

Findings: Understanding status from the outside

Our proposition is that desistance often involves a profound symbolic trade-off: leaving a world in which one holds status—even if criminalized—for another in which one becomes socially unseen and, at times, devalued. This is more than a change in behaviour; it involves the loss and reordering of identity, symbolic capital and position. In what follows, we draw on collaborative autoethnographic material to show how status is understood, made legible, and defended across street and carceral worlds, and why attending to this helps clarify what is at stake in desistance.

To illustrate how status and identity are constructed and lived within criminality and a pro-criminal mindset Max reflects on his experience in conversation with Andi:

I was living in a little flat at the time, not long out of prison. I was both selling and using crack cocaine and heroin. I remember waking up in the mornings, sending out texts on the ‘graft phone’, taking the drugs I was addicted to just to ‘get going’, then heading out, in the rain, on my pedal bike. (Pablo Escobar I was not). I lived near a big office building, and every morning that winter, as I hobbled out on my bike with deals of crack and heroin stashed in my mouth, I would see the droves of office workers walking over the hill towards the building—what felt like thousands of them, dressed in work clothes, trudging into a grey box for the day. I used to look at them and think, ‘These fools.’

That life—the nine-to-five, the pension pots, the credit card payments, the marriage—was completely abstract to me. It wasn’t just unattainable; I rejected it. I diminished it. It didn’t speak to me. And yet there I was: unemployed, skint, fresh out of jail (again), and a pretty unsuccessful drug dealer on a pedal bike in the rain. But I was still active, still competing, still placed in my social field.

Max’s position ‘on road’—however precarious—still conferred meaning. As a drug dealer, as a criminal, and as someone embedded in the local street economy, he occupied a place that afforded a degree of recognition and visibility. His standing was neither high-ranking nor mythologized, and it carried obvious risks, yet it nevertheless marked him out as someone acknowledged within that world.

From the outside—perhaps to those office workers—Max may have appeared near the bottom of a social hierarchy: a 26-year-old unemployed, drug-addicted ex-prisoner. Within his own field, however, status was signified differently. A pair of Nike Air Max, a Hugo Boss tracksuit, and a freshly trimmed skin fade were not superficial embellishments but meaningful markers of participation, survival, and competitiveness in a social economy governed by alternative codes of value.

While seemingly oppositional or nihilistic, this mindset should not be dismissed as irrational. It reflects a rational adaptation to constrained circumstances—one that accrues identity, belonging and status within a particular symbolic economy. Within that field, Max's actions made sense. His rejection of the 'straight life' was not rooted in apathy, but in strong allegiance to a world in which he, and others in that social field, have built an epistemological framework.

Designer clothes, gold chains, muscle-bound bodies, slang and swagger—these are frequently interpreted as signs of arrogance, deviance or non-conformity to many prosocial fields. Yet within many working-class and criminalized spaces, they function as status markers: visible signs of participation, competence and legitimacy within a symbolic economy shaped by exclusion and constraint.

Throughout our dialogue over the past 4 years, Andi often resonated with Max's accounts of seeking status and rejecting conventional norms. One conversation drew on an experience as a 16-year-old that illustrates how status was experienced and performed:

After a heavy gang fight where I'd injured a lad from the estate, after it all kicked off because some vigilante boys had smashed up my mate's house for selling brown [heroin] on their turf. I ended up running through the estate with a pickaxe handle in my hand, alongside older lads who had proper skin in the game—a real 'name' around our endz. As we tore past, a group of lads from another school who I'd often had beef with clocked me and shouted, 'yo, it's Brierley.' In that moment, I felt it - status, recognition. They saw me as a 'bad man in the game,' and that was exactly what I wanted. I hadn't even finished school yet, but I was already building my confidence off extreme street violence. This was normal in the multiple and chaotic environments I grew up. I didn't even really have the heart for it, but I went along with it, and as you can see, I took the reputation, the status, the recognition gladly.

We recognize that framing status in this way—particularly in street and prison contexts—may sit uncomfortably with practitioners and academics embedded in different professional norms and values shaped by class, professional and institutional language and expectations. In this context, the behaviours and symbols that confer status in carceral or street subcultures may be seen as criminogenic, deviant or inappropriate. Indeed, prior work has described how working-class aspirations frequently clash with the values of a predominantly middle-class criminal justice workforce and how these tensions can hinder relationship-building in practice (Brierley 2021). The point here is not to legitimize these status codes—street and carceral—but to understand and take them seriously as part of the social worlds from which desistance must be negotiated. We argue that, in failure to do so, it becomes difficult to understand how—and why—people may struggle to transition away from them.

Lived experience: Status collapse

The collapse of status and identity should be understood not as an abstract notion but as a lived and often destabilizing reality. For many, it is overwhelming, creating an abyss of uncertainty and a seething insecurity that comes with leaving one social world behind—pro-criminal—and

attempting to enter another—prosocial. Grounded in our position as working-class men on either side of the North of England, having navigated this transition, we define *status collapse* as the disintegration of symbolic capital, identity and social recognition that occurs when an individual leaves a social world in which they held status—often through criminal capital, street credibility or carceral reputation—and enters one where those forms of value no longer translate. It is not simply a loss of power or position, but a deeper rupture in one's sense of meaning, legitimacy, and standing. In the context of desistance, *status collapse* marks a critical and under-theorized barrier to change. Individuals are not only asked to stop offending but also to abandon the very structures that once affirmed their identity—without immediate access to new forms of recognition or value in the prosocial world.

Returning to Max, he describes how he experienced status collapse acutely after leaving rehab in 2019.

I was living in temporary accommodation. No job, no employment history, no qualifications - nothing to my name outside of the life I'd just left behind. The people in my old world knew who I was. I had status, even if it was built on shaky foundations. But now, I was in a new town. No one knew me. Not who I was, not what I'd been through, not what I was trying to become.

Beyond the temporary holding space of the recovery circles around me, I felt completely invisible. I was going to college, volunteering, trying to 'do the right thing' - and yet I couldn't shake the feeling that I didn't belong. These spaces, the social cues, the norms, the way people moved, spoke, interacted - it all felt alien. I couldn't read the field. I was watching people navigate it with ease while I stood on the margins, awkward, unsure, trying to make sense of how to be in this world.

My old life had been destructive, chaotic, and painful - but I understood it. I was someone in it. Here, I wasn't anyone. I knew, logically, that going back to addiction and crime would ruin me. But I still caught myself wondering: What am I doing here? Is this really for me?

What Max describes here in this period is a kind of *symbolic freefall*—a time marked not just by external instability but also by a profound rupture in identity and social meaning. The codes of the new world were not just unfamiliar—they didn't yet offer a way to be someone. The status he had once held—however conditional or precarious—had collapsed. In its place: disorientation, invisibility and a sense of being ontologically adrift (see Turner 1974).

This sense of being adrift in the early stages of the desistance process was far from solely being anxious about stepping into a new social field, as the dialogue unfolded between Max and Andi; there was a consensus on the notion of a status collapse, reflected by pro-criminal peers. Drawing on autoethnographic reflection, we recognize how peers can ridicule or reject attempts to 'go straight', framing legitimate work as weakness. In our previous circles and indeed in the carceral field, credibility is built on the ability to be perceived as capable of 'taking care of oneself', prison time, and criminal capital. Stepping into the world of 'nine-to-five' can feel like stepping out of respect as outlined by Andi in the reflections:

After my last [fourth] prison sentence I landed a warehouse job, pulling long shifts for minimum wage, not for the first time. One freezing morning on the way in, I bumped into a lad I knew from Doncaster who was always in and out for fighting - someone I'd once rated and who carried weight [reputation] on the prison wing. I was wrapped up in a trench coat, dirty work boots on, heading for another day stacking boxes, wrapping pallets. He looked me up and down and asked where I was off to. Trying to save face, I said, 'Grafting,' hoping it sounded more street than saying 'to work.' But he clocked me straightaway. 'Mate you gone legit?' he said, dragging the word out, like it was an insult. The truth is, I was in and out of persistent criminality anyway, so it shouldn't have hit me the way it did. But right there I felt small - like all the credibility and

status I'd built over many years of criminality and years in jail had just drained out of me on the pavement. I walked off embarrassed, knowing I'd lost status in the eyes of people I had spent time obtaining it from.

This moment captures the internal and external struggles of desistance and the internalized loss of credible status. Andi's attempt to reframe legitimate work as a form of 'graft'—a term with ambiguous connotations in street culture—fails to confer the intended respect. Instead, his shift toward conventional life is perceived as a loss of authenticity, street capital or toughness. The interaction highlights how the pursuit of symbolic capital in pro-criminal contexts can continue to exert pressure, even when individuals attempt to exit that world.

Here, Andi recalls being lonely and leaving his pro-criminal relationships behind. He spoke to his line manager in youth justice as he undertook his degree:

Boss, I've got a flat, a car, a job, I'm even studying now. On paper it looks good. But I've got no mates. The ones I did have see me in a different light. I feel alright when I'm busy at work or grafting on an assignment for my degree, but when the weekend comes and I'm sat at home, that's when it hits. I miss the respect, the validation I had from my old people. Negative or not, they were my boys, my family. Now they're gone - or maybe it's me that's gone.

This changed over time, as Andi became a father and husband, but the loss was more than friendships and networks—it was a bereavement of the status from respected peers, whether pro-criminal or not.

The accounts here of Max and Andi give shape to what we refer to as *status collapse*—a disintegration of symbolic capital and identity that occurs when one leaves a world in which they were someone and enters another in which they are no one. It is this messy, often conflicted process of transition between social fields—marked by a loss of recognition, value, and belonging—that so often slips through the cracks of academic literature, service design and the polished narratives of 'change'. This shift in perspective helps us grasp the complex and often contradictory choices faced by prison leavers and marginalized young men as they navigate the pull of street culture and the uncertain promise of conventional success.

What is being asked of people?

So, what does this tell us about desistance? When people are being asked to transition from persistent offending to a none-offending lifestyle, we need to take stock of exactly what is being asked of them. We believe this duality constitutes one of the hidden and unacknowledged pains of desistance (see [Nugent and Schinkel 2016](#)). As [Travis \(2005\)](#) argues, returning citizens often re-enter a society that has little space for them—not just in terms of employment or housing, but in terms of social value. To desist from crime is not simply to walk away from harmful behaviours or negative influences. It is to leave behind a social world where one has spent years accumulating cultural capital (*knowledge, competencies, skills, codes*), social capital (*networks, relationships*) and symbolic capital (*reputation, standing, value*)—in other words, *status*. Entering a world where those forms of capital no longer translate into anything meaningful constructs *the abyss*—a space of disorientation, devaluation and symbolic dislocation.

What awaits may not only be material instability but also symbolic marginality. When we ask someone to desist, we may not merely be asking them to 'make better choices'. We are often asking them to abandon the only world in which they were someone—and to

enter one in which they are no one. That is a profound collapse of status and rupture of identity, one that demands not only immense internal strength but also sustained opportunities to access a new form of status that may align with a reimagined self. This, we believe, is why so many people do not falter in deciding to stop offending—but live in the long, lonely aftermath of that decision. We suggest that grappling with this tension is essential for designing interventions and pathways that recognize the social risks of desistance and seek to reconfigure and reconstruct what is valued within these groups.

Rebuilding status on a prosocial terrain

To be clear, our position is not one of pessimism. While desistance may often entail a collapse in social standing and a disorienting loss of identity and status, it also presents a parallel promise—particularly for those who enter the ever-expanding justice field: the opportunity to rebuild status. It is possible to forge a new, prosocial and sustainable identity. One rooted not in rejection of the system, but in meaningful contribution to it.

Max reflects in a conversation with Andi that a major part of his early motivation during recovery—through education, career-building and public engagement—was driven by a pursuit of status:

At one point early on, I remember seeing peers in this new space who had become volunteers - they had lanyards on. I wanted one of those lanyards more than anything. I recognised that they were carving out a lane for themselves in this new world I'd just stepped into - and the lanyard symbolised that. I needed a lanyard!

In response, Andi laughed and stated:

It was the same for me. Early in my youth justice career. We went for a pint after work as we had an away day. Everyone took their badges off, and my colleague said, 'Andi, take your badge off, we look like silly social workers.' My boss who knew me well, followed that up with, 'he might not want to take it off.' This was because he knew that badge symbolised a new and exciting chapter for me. Indeed, the badge granted me a newfound status that mitigated the collapse.

Importantly, Max also articulates that his drive wasn't only about status. In this same discussion, he explained:

I genuinely cared about the work, about the people I was supporting, and about the systemic injustices still faced by others - especially those I felt had been left behind. But two things can be true at once. One can be authentic in their actions and still be driven by status.

Both Andi and Max were carving out a new identity. They wanted to become someone again—respected, visible, and valued—just in a different social field. In hindsight, Max recognizes that this ambition—this hunger—was, at least in part, a response to the symbolic trade-off he had made. Having left behind his former life and social standing, he found himself starting again from scratch, with no symbolic capital to draw on. In this sense, recovery was not only a health journey; it was a symbolic project of *reconstruction*.

As previously outlined, we suggest that understanding status as a legitimate feature in the desistance process, can help to inform how the criminal justice system and those working alongside it can integrate and embed an understanding and recognition of status within its offender and desistance pathways. Glancing over to the field of addiction recovery—a close relative of desistance (Best 2019)—recognizing the role of status in shaping behaviour, particularly for those embedded in subcultural social fields, may help to explain why,

from our observation, recovery fellowships such as *Narcotics Anonymous* and *Alcoholics Anonymous* can be effective in inviting and sustaining long-term change. Such fellowships offer more than abstinence or behavioural change—they offer an entire status system (Best and Laudet 2010). Within these fellowships, you can quickly become ‘someone’. A person with 90 days clean receives a keyring. An ‘old-timer’ chairs the meeting. Personal shares are met with applause and admiration. Respect is earned through service. Recovery fellowship therefore becomes a moral economy. One in which recognition, identity, and symbolic status are embedded in the very fabric of the community (see White 2009).

However, it is important not to overextend this metaphor. While fellowships show how status systems can be redirected toward prosocial ends, it can be a trap—one that we have observed—to assume that recreating ‘recovery-like’ spaces will automatically produce similar outcomes. Desistance and recovery may be theoretical cousins (Best 2019), but in practice, they are distinct. Their terrains, social dynamics, and the meanings attached to identity transformation and status are not always interchangeable—efforts to map one onto the other often fail to recognize that distinction.

Embracing status in lived experience professionals

While aspects of street culture are often looked down upon, dismissed, or deemed inappropriate in formal criminal justice settings, professionals with lived experience—such as Andi and Max—have found that these very traits can function as powerful relational tools when working with individuals still involved in crime (Brierley et al. 2025). In practice, the gestures, language, and demeanour associated with street culture are often interpreted as signals of authenticity, trust, and solidarity.

Andi recalls, as he transitioned from a persistent offender to youth justice practitioner, he constantly battled with the children and young people from his home city who recognized him as closer to their social standing than that of many colleagues:

‘Andi, you are one of us, not one of them’ he was constantly reminded.

One particular young man involved in serious crime stated:

You know what you are talking about, but these lot don’t.

This observation didn’t reflect academic knowledge or trained understanding of how to write pre-sentence reports or manage risk per se, but the young person recognizing that Andi could obtain and maintain status in *his* space and social context, which accrued respect, validation and recognition. Far from being problematic, retaining elements of street culture in the desistance process—integrating past identity with a new social role—can be precisely the embodiment of status that proves valuable in working with others yet to undertake the desistance process.

This interplay highlights the symbolic and communicative nature of status, where adherence to street codes can *still* confer respect and legitimacy—even *within* the desistance process. Brierley and Best (2025) refer to this as *Desistance Habitus*: a concept capturing how symbolic capital rooted in street culture can be reconfigured as both a relational and professional asset in criminal justice practice. Rather than treating such capital as inherently criminogenic, Desistance Habitus reframes it as a bridge between worlds—enabling practitioners to connect on meaningful terms while modelling alternative pathways to success. Here, Bourdieu’s (1986) concept of symbolic capital—the legitimacy and value conferred upon individuals by others within a social field—offers a useful analytical lens. Fraser’s (2013) development of *street habitus* further captures how embodied styles, language, competencies,

mannerisms, and dispositions shaped in criminalized environments are not mere residues of deviance but situated competencies that carry legitimacy in particular contexts.

Within peer-led support work, such attributes function as assets. When professionals with lived experience support others navigating the justice system, the strength of that relationship often stems not from formal empathy, but from mutual fluency: a shared background, a recognizable stance, and a cultural shorthand that fosters authenticity. We argue that, built on the currency of status, these are the relational bridges that matter. Such symbolic alignment may allow a worker with lived experience to ‘cut through’ and be heard where a professional might not. Shared social understandings and cultural references form the basis of genuine relationship-building. These connections help individuals feel seen, heard, and validated within a system that often devalues the very traits and interests that give them meaning—beyond their offending behaviour.

Recent contributions caution that lived experience can be mobilized in ways that are tokenistic and, at worst, exploitative (Sapouna 2021; Yeo *et al.* 2022). This requires that ‘lived experience’ in professional and voluntary roles is engaged with meaningfully and authentically rather than treated as a flat credential. Emerging work suggests lived experience is stratified: different histories generate different forms of status and capital, and therefore different modalities of relational legitimacy within practice (Brierley 2026; Brierley and Harriott, *forthcoming*). For our argument, this matters because the symbolic capital that carries purchase in male, working-class, pro-criminal social fields may not translate uniformly across audiences, settings, or social worlds. The legitimizing force of lived experience is therefore graduated and context-dependent; who it is put in front of—including those still embedded in street and carceral worlds. Where institutions collapse these differences and treat lived experience as interchangeable—detached from audience, purpose, role design and progression—there is a risk that it becomes a performative tick-box aesthetic: tokenistic, and less effective precisely where ‘cutting through’ matters most.

Crucially, for the notion of status, professionals who carry elements of their past that still resonate with the social field of criminal subcultures, and who visibly occupy a form of status that service users both recognize and respect, can create space for growth and adaptation to emerge from within the person’s *own* world, rather than being imposed from outside. In essence, this makes the process organic and humanistic, rather than transactional or conditional. In other words, it provides a conduit through which the possibility of desistance becomes a visible and tangible reality. Indeed, if we consider how status plays a significant role in the desistance process for working-class men, we can begin to ask how desistance might be better supported for those still embedded in criminal or carceral worlds—in ways that acknowledge not only what must be changed, but also what must be mourned.

Conclusion

Within this article, as two working-class men who have transitioned through the criminal justice system as both persistent offenders and prisoners in the north of England, we have argued that status—as symbolic capital and the felt sense of *being someone*—must be placed as a one of the central features in how we understand desistance. For many working-class men and boys, crime was not simply an act of defiance or survival, but a means of attaining recognition, identity, and social value, against a backdrop of exclusion. The journey away from offending, then, is not just behavioural; it can be symbolic, existential—and deeply costly.

We have introduced the concept of *status collapse* to describe the profound identity rupture that can occur when individuals leave behind criminalized social worlds in which they held standing, only to enter prosocial spaces where they are often unseen, unknown,

and undervalued, constructing a potential abyss. Desistance is rarely a clean break; it is a prolonged negotiation between what is lost and what might one day be regained. Without acknowledging this trade-off, we risk misunderstanding not only the barriers to change but also the weight of what we ask people to walk away from and leave behind.

To that end, we have proposed the concept of *Desistance Habitus* as a framework to explore how symbolic capital from street or carceral contexts can be reconfigured and carried into prosocial domains. We argue that interventions which meaningfully support desistance must offer more than just relational services that meet criminogenic needs or surveillance—they must offer *status*. This includes visible, valued roles for people with lived experience; cultural recognition; and opportunities to *be someone* as they once were in a new world that too often renders them and this street or carceral habitus invisible.

We have argued that an over-focus on professional kindness and relational support can be vital, but on its own, it is likely to fall short of professional understanding of what we are asking of desisting individuals. Status is not an optional extra. It is a key feature of the desistance transition. If we want desistance to be sustainable, we must create spaces where status can be reimaged, earned and affirmed in ways that honour both where someone has been—and who they are trying to become.

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