

*Lectio praecursoria*

## Pathways to desistance from crime: expectations and challenges upon release from open prisons

EMMA VILLMAN

Emma Villmanin väitöskirja ”Pathways to desistance from crime: expectations and challenges upon release from open prisons” tarkastettiin Helsingin yliopiston valtiotieteellisessä tiedekunnassa 24.1.2025. Vastaväittäjänä toimi apulaisprofessori Kristian Mjåland Agderin yliopistosta ja kustoksena professori Janne Kivivuori Helsingin yliopistosta. Väitöskirjan yhteenvedo on luettavissa verkko-osoitteessa <http://hdl.handle.net/10138/588143>.

At the start of a new year, many people make promises for the year ahead—resolutions to live healthier, improve themselves, or make choices that benefit the environment. However, these ambitions often fade quickly as the challenges of breaking old habits become clear. Changing one’s life is difficult and usually requires more than just willpower. The same is true for those trying to leave behind a life of crime, which is the topic of this doctoral dissertation.

In this study, I have examined how people with a history of criminal behavior attempt to end their criminal careers. I interviewed 45 individuals who were serving the final part of their prison sentences in open prisons in Finland. I asked them about their feelings and expectations regarding their upcoming release from prison, but also about their thoughts about future involvement in criminal activity. I was able to reinterview about half of these individuals (n=22) six months later. They had been out of prison for some time and were able to reflect on their experiences of reintegrating into society and their attempts to leave their criminal careers behind. 16 of them were

interviewed a third and final time a year later. By then, they had gained even more understanding of what the life after release could look like.

### Theoretical Perspectives on Desistance from Crime

The study on how individuals end their criminal careers is known as desistance from crime. This somewhat unusual word, desistance, to desist, means to stop or abstain from doing something. Desistance from crime, therefore, refers specifically to the cessation of criminal activity among individuals with a prior history of offending. In contrast, if you have never committed a crime, you are abstaining from crime, but not desisting, as desistance implies a history of criminal behavior.

The study of desistance has become a growing field over the past two decades. And while the reasons offenders end their criminal careers vary, some main theoretical approaches explain this process. Specifically, desistance from crime is understood to depend on both subjective factors and structural factors.

Subjective factors emphasize inner motivation and changes within the individual as the drivers of desistance. Structural theories, on the other hand, stress the role of institutions, culture, and societal conditions in facilitating change. And much of the debate within desistance research has revolved around what comes first, the individual's will to change or the structural opportunities that make change possible, such as becoming parent or getting employed. And although it can be challenging to empirically separate these factors, it seems like an openness to change is a central prerequisite for desistance (LeBel et al., 2008). Subjective, structural, and relational factors are, however, deeply intertwined throughout the process of desistance.

When discussing the process of desistance, the word 'process' is particularly significant and reflects one of the key findings in early desistance research. Desistance from crime does not happen overnight; it is typically a long journey, a process, marked by multiple attempts and occasional relapses into criminal behavior. The process is often gradual, involving fewer crimes or less severe crimes, before a complete cessation. For instance, one of my informants experienced a 10-year phase of law-abiding life before again returning to criminal activity. The pathways to desistance are many and they are highly individual.

### **Desistance as an identity transformation?**

In this doctoral dissertation, I have primarily focused on a strand of subjective theories of desistance that emphasize identity. These identity theories focus on the cognitive and narrative transformations necessary for desistance, arguing that it requires a shift from an offender identity to a non-offender identity. Previous research on desistance and identity has argued that the ability to imagine a possible future self and to reconstruct a new self-narrative—a new story of 'who I am'—is central to successfully leaving crime behind

(Maruna, 2001; Paternoster & Bushway, 2009). The idea is that desistance from crime is not merely about stopping a behavior; it goes deeper. It requires changing who you are and how you perceive yourself.

I found these theories of identity transformation interesting and one of my initial motivations when starting my doctoral research was to explore whether they hold true for Finnish offenders. Do Finnish offenders believe that they need to change their identity to successfully desist from crime? To explore this, I conducted my interviews using a narrative approach. I wanted to understand how people approach and talk about desistance from crime, both before and after their release from prison. The qualitative longitudinal approach allowed me to analyze narrative changes over time, how the interviewees talked about desistance before release and after release. This provided insights into how individuals attempting to desist view themselves and their efforts to move away from crime over an extended period.

By positioning the research around the transition phase before and after release, I also wanted to explore the social integration of prisoners upon their release from prison. As already mentioned, structural factors play a central role in desistance, and we know that released prisoners face numerous structural challenges. Many individuals released from Finnish prisons are homeless, unemployed, burdened with debts, and struggle with substance abuse, as well as physical and mental health issues. If wanting to understand desistance from crime, we also need to understand the conditions in which desistance attempts occur. Therefore, my objective was to gain a contextual understanding of the desistance processes within my sample. This approach sought to identify not only the potential pitfalls but also the supportive structures for desistance in Finland.

The interviewed sample consisted of prisoners who had served in open prisons in Finland. They were between 20 and 55 years old and had a history of repeat offending and prison sentences for various types of crimes. Most interviewees expressed a desire to end their criminal careers and desist from crime. Since many were at the early phase of this journey, the dissertation concentrates on the early stages of the desistance process.

### **Key findings from the research**

Turning to the findings of this dissertation, I will focus on three key points that highlight the most important findings from my research. Firstly, the study revealed that while prisoners' desistance expectations might be overly optimistic, they are grounded in practical aspirations focused on social integration. We know from previous studies that most people in Finnish prisons—and prisons elsewhere in the world—believe, or at least hope, they will not commit more crimes after their release (Dhami et al., 2006; Kivivuori & Linderborg, 2010; Lindquist et al., 2023). However, many of them are wrong. Recidivism statistics in Finland show that about 60% of sentenced prisoners are sentenced to a new imprisonment or community service within five years (Prison and Probation Service of Finland, 2024). This indicates that prisoners often have overly optimistic expectations about their future. My analysis of how the interviewees discussed their desistance expectations, again, revealed something else. The pre-release expectations were not mere ungrounded hopes; rather, they were practical plans for change. The interviewees identified concrete steps they needed to take to transform their lives, such as securing employment, seeking support, and changing surroundings. I argue that these elaborated desistance expectations highlight the challenges individuals anticipate upon release and underscore where support is most needed.

Secondly, the findings highlight that the diverse pathways toward desistance also are reflected in a variety of desistance narratives. In previous desistance literature, desistance narratives have primarily been viewed as a means for desisters to explain their transformation — as stories that depict the shift from “who I was” as an offender to “who I have become” as a non-offender (Liem & Richardson, 2014; Maruna, 2001). These transformation stories are often framed as clear-cut accounts of personal change. But what about other stories of desistance from crime? And what narratives emerge during the liminal stage between persistence in crime and desistance from crime, before adopting a transformation narrative? And does successful desistance require adopting a transformation narrative? These questions inspired me to explore how desistance narratives differ at various stages of the process.

In my data, I found some examples of transformative change, where individuals explicitly described their desistance journey as one of personal transformation. However, I also encountered more subtle forms of change, where people simply stopped committing crimes without framing it as a dramatic life overhaul. I argue that we need to broaden our understanding of desistance narratives to include these more subtle, less conventional stories. Desistance is not always a neatly packaged success story—it can take many forms, and our theorization on desistance narratives must reflect that diversity.

My third and final finding concerns a program for early release with electronic monitoring, known as supervised probationary freedom, or “*valvottu koevapaus*” in Finnish. This program allows prisoners to be released up to six months prior to the regular conditional release, living at home under electronic monitoring while participating in work or training during the day and abstaining from drug use. There are quite strict eligibility requirements

for this early release, and the supervision is extensive. It is extensive to that degree that some interviewees were sent back to prison or expressed reluctance to go through the program again. However, many of my interviewees emphasized how crucial this program was for their social integration and, ultimately, for supporting their desistance from crime.

It seems as if the primary strength of this program of early release with electronic monitoring lies in its focus on preparation for release. To qualify for early release, prisoners must secure housing and a daily occupation, such as work or training, with support from prison personnel. I argue that this kind of structured preparation and support would be beneficial for most prisoners, and not just those considered eligible for early release with electronic monitoring. The finding highlights the potential for wider implementation of similar approaches to enhance reintegration and possibly reduce recidivism.

### Concluding remarks

The interviewees in this study viewed desistance from crime primarily as an inner process. However, desistance was also a process deeply influenced by its context—by the people, opportunities, expectations, and conditions surrounding the individual. Achieving desistance from crime requires some sort of support, be it then structural or relational.

Many of the interviewees faced significant challenges with reintegration upon release, and some committed new crimes. Changing one's life is undeniably difficult. Still, I argue that optimism about desistance prior to release should not be underestimated. Optimistic desistance narratives proved to be surprisingly durable. Being optimistic and being hopeful about one's future is essential. However, given the significant challenges associated with social integration, strategic desistance expectations should be paired with alternative plans

for when the initial strategies do not work as intended.

The findings of this dissertation suggest that desistance from crime does not necessarily have to take the form of a radical identity transformation. The sample included a multitude of pathways to desistance from crime, each one of them showing how differently change can happen. If we, as a society, wish to strengthen prisoners' desistance expectations, the emphasis should lie on recognizing individuals as capable of change, fostering a culture that allows that, while equally focusing on desistance as a practical matter through actions that enhance the social integration upon release from prison.

## LITERATURE

- Dhami, M., Mandel, D., Loewenstein, G., & Ayton, P. (2006). Prisoners' Positive Illusions of Their Post-Release Success. *Law and Human Behavior, 30*(6), 631-647. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10979-006-9040-1>
- Kivivuori, J., & Linderborg, H. (2010). Negative Life Events and Self-Control as Correlates of Self-Assessed Re-Offending Probability among Finnish Prisoners. *European Journal of Criminology, 7*(2), 123-139. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1477370809354139>
- LeBel, T. P., Burnett, R., Maruna, S., & Bushway, S. (2008). The 'Chicken and Egg' of Subjective and Social Factors in Desistance from Crime. *European Journal of Criminology, 5*(2), 131-159. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1477370807087640>
- Liem, M., & Richardson, N. J. (2014). The role of transformation narratives in desistance among released lifers. *Criminal Justice and Behavior, 41*(6), 692-712. <https://doi.org/10.1177/009385481351544>

- Lindquist, C. H., Lattimore, P. K., Scaggs, S. J. A., Buck Willison, J., Walker, J. W., Jaspersen, N., & Labrecque, R. M. (2023). When Pre-Release Optimism Meets Post-Release Reality: Understanding Reentry Success Through a Longitudinal Framework Assessing Pre- and Post-Release Perceptions. *Crime & Delinquency*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00111287231207836>
- Maruna, S. (2001). *Making Good: How Ex-Convicts Reform and Rebuild their Lives* (1 ed.). American Psychological Association.
- Paternoster, R., & Bushway, S. (2009). Desistance and the “Feared Self”: Toward an Identity Theory of Criminal Desistance. *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology*, 99(4), 1103-1156.
- Prison and Probation Service of Finland. (2024). *Statistical Yearbook 2023*. Prison and Probation Service of Finland. [https://www.rikosseuraamus.fi/material/sites/riise\\_ja\\_rskk\\_yhteiset/dokumentit/jqzr8ja9q/RISE\\_Prison\\_and\\_Probation\\_Service\\_of\\_Finland\\_Statistical\\_yearbook\\_2023.pdf](https://www.rikosseuraamus.fi/material/sites/riise_ja_rskk_yhteiset/dokumentit/jqzr8ja9q/RISE_Prison_and_Probation_Service_of_Finland_Statistical_yearbook_2023.pdf)