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The Impact of Incarceration on the Desistance Process Among Individuals Who Chronically Engage in Criminal Activity

Christopher Wildeman, Ph.D.

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U.S. Department of Justice
Office of Justice Programs
810 Seventh St. N.W.
Washington, DC 20531

Amy L. Solomon

Acting Assistant Attorney General, Office of Justice Programs

Jennifer Scherer, Ph.D.

Acting Director, National Institute of Justice

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Executive Summary

This paper relies on the definition of the desistance process most recently developed in Rocque (2021), which conceptualizes desistance as a gradual movement away from crime and antisocial behavior and toward prosocial behavior.

Research shows that imprisonment has few, if any, beneficial effects on criminal activity, except for the period when the individual is in a correctional facility. It also shows that imprisonment has disruptive effects on the life-course of individuals, leading to worse labor market outcomes, more disrupted family lives, and worse health. As a result, it seems reasonable to assume that incarceration impedes the desistance process — or, at the very least, does not facilitate desistance directly or indirectly.

Unfortunately, virtually none of the existing research considers how imprisonment affects the desistance process for individuals who chronically engage in criminal activity. This is an important oversight because this is the group of individuals for whom desistance from crime is most important, both for society (because they commit a large number of crimes) and for themselves (because their criminal activity often dovetails with a number of other antisocial behaviors that impede their well-being). The research also rarely measures shifts in criminal activity, focusing instead on criminal justice contact, and provides little insight into how conditions of confinement moderate the effects of incarceration on desistance. Much of the strongest research on desistance also relies on data that are not current, making its connections to contemporary society unclear.

This paper considers how imprisonment might shape the desistance process for individuals who chronically engage in criminal activity. Assuming these individuals respond to imprisonment as do other populations involved in the justice system, research suggests that long imprisonments will disrupt desistance more than short imprisonments and that short prison and jail incarcerations will disrupt desistance more than noncustodial sanctions (e.g., house arrest, probation, community service).

For policymakers, this suggests that less punitive sanctions may both save scarce state and federal resources and facilitate the desistance process for individuals who chronically engage in criminal activity. The benefits must be weighed against the costs of crime, however. Because even this population rapidly decreases their engagement in crime as they age, policymakers should still strongly consider shorter sentences. This is especially the case in the wake of deep budget cuts due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

For practitioners, both the findings on the well-being of individuals who chronically offend prior to imprisonment and the need for these individuals to “make good” after release from prison indicate that a broad suite of programs during imprisonment is needed to facilitate the desistance process. Such individuals who receive noncustodial sanctions are especially likely to need services because they must begin the desistance process immediately or risk custodial sanctions.

For researchers, the lack of a significant body of research on how imprisonment shapes the desistance process calls for a substantial investment in research that (1) extends several core Bureau of Justice Statistics studies to provide more direct insight into this question, (2) provides rigorous evidence regarding how conditions of confinement moderate the effects of imprisonment on the desistance process for this population, and (3) extends both general population and high-risk longitudinal studies of youth later in the life-course by using survey data to consider these questions.

The Impact of Incarceration on the Desistance Process Among Individuals Who Chronically Engage in Criminal Activity

Introduction

A large body of research documents how common incarceration now is for Americans (Bonczar, 2003; Enns et al., 2019; Pettit & Western, 2004) and considers how contact with the prison and jail systems shapes the course of a person's life (Kirk & Wakefield, 2018; Wakefield & Uggen, 2010; Western, 2007). This research focuses heavily on the way in which incarceration affects an individual's labor market outcomes (Pager, 2003; Western, 2002), family life (Braman, 2004; Comfort, 2008; Turney & Wildeman, 2013), and mental and physical health (Wildeman & Wang, 2017).

A smaller body of research also considers how incarceration shapes a person's criminal activity and recidivism, often measured as reincarceration (Drago, Galbiati, & Vertova, 2009; Nagin, Cullen, & Jonson, 2009). Using a variety of identification strategies, the research generally suggests that being assigned to a higher-security facility rather than a lower-security facility increases the level of antisocial behavior both during imprisonment and after release (Drago, Galbiati, & Vertova, 2009). The research also indicates that being given a custodial sanction — often a short prison or jail stay — instead of a noncustodial sanction — often being placed on probation or sentenced to house arrest — increases the risk of antisocial and criminal behavior (Nagin, Cullen, & Jonson, 2009).

Unfortunately, research in this area has at least four core limitations that are relevant for policy, practice, and research. First, most research on the criminal activity of individuals who were formerly incarcerated focuses narrowly on crime rather than on the desistance process (Maruna, 2001; Rocque, 2021). This is a major gap because the lack of new criminal activity or criminal justice contact is less informative than a broader conception of desistance, which focuses on moving away from criminal activity and antisocial behavior and moving toward prosocial engagement. Second, virtually none of the research considers how the conditions of confinement in prisons and jails may moderate the effects of imprisonment on both life-course outcomes and the desistance process. This is a key oversight with special importance for practitioners because it means that we have very little insight into how the vast differences in conditions of confinement (Wildeman, Fitzpatrick, & Goldman, 2018) shape the outcomes of individuals who were formerly incarcerated. Third, much of the research on desistance does not consider the experiences of contemporary cohorts, who are highly diverse, experience incarceration at high rates, and have many of the traditional pathways to desistance blocked. Instead, it examines cohorts who came of age in the 1950s or earlier. Finally — and maybe most importantly — virtually all of the research on how imprisonment shapes the life-course focuses on the average effects of prison and jail incarceration. This is problematic because it means that previous research has shed little light on how imprisonment affects the life-course outcomes of individuals who are chronically engaged in criminal activity.

The goal of this paper is to consider how imprisonment shapes the desistance process for individuals who are chronically criminally active and to discuss the implications for policy, practice, and research. The paper focuses on the effects of both a long prison sentence relative to a shorter prison sentence and a short prison sentence relative to either receiving a noncustodial sanction or evading criminal justice system contact. Many individuals who are chronically active in crime will have had significant criminal justice contact throughout the course of their lives, and relatively few will have avoided criminal justice contact completely (Farrington & West, 1993). The paper assumes, then, that receiving no criminal justice sanctions is an uncommon outcome for this group; thus, it merits less attention. In addition to providing an in-depth discussion of the fact and duration of imprisonment on the desistance

process for individuals who chronically engage in criminal activity, the paper also addresses how essential conditions of confinement likely moderate these effects.

The paper is divided into three sections. The first section reviews existing research on how prison and jail incarceration affect crime and other core life-course outcomes that could be tied to the desistance process. When looking at research on the effects of imprisonment on crime, special attention is paid to studies exploiting quasi-experimental variation in the fact, duration, and severity of prison and jail incarceration, with more emphasis on imprisonment. When examining research on the effects of incarceration on other life-course outcomes, the paper focuses both on obstacles to causal inference in that area and on the fact that many of these studies are more informative about the effects of jail incarceration and short prison incarceration than long prison incarceration.

The second section summarizes some of the problems with current research on how prison and jail incarceration (relative to noncustodial sanctions) affect the desistance process. Specifically, it focuses on problems with measurement of the desistance process, inattention to conditions of confinement, reliance on samples that do not represent contemporary society, and, most importantly, relative inattention in the literature to individuals who chronically offend. This section also discusses the likely effects of incarceration on these individuals.

The paper closes by discussing the implications of these findings for policy, practice, and research. More attention is paid to the discussion of research, as the research in this area is in special need of development.

Effects of Incarceration on Crime and Life-Course Outcomes

This section discusses the various ways in which prison and jail incarceration could shape desistance from crime. It first looks at research on the effects of incarceration on crime and highlights how longer prison stays affect crime relative to shorter stays, how harsher conditions of confinement affect crime relative to less punitive conditions, and how noncustodial sanctions affect crime relative to custodial sanctions. It then examines how prison and jail incarceration — often, but not always, shorter stints in prison and jail — shape an individual’s labor market prospects, family life, housing stability, and mental health. In so doing, it provides indirect evidence on how incarceration affects some of the features of life observed during the desistance process (Laub & Sampson, 2003; Maruna, 2001).

Effects of Incarceration on Crime

Although a substantial body of criminological research focuses on the effects of imprisonment on offending, two areas seem to especially merit attention here: (1) the fact of imprisonment, including both custodial sanctions relative to noncustodial sanctions and length of imprisonment,¹ contingent upon being imprisoned, and (2) the nature of confinement.

Fact of Imprisonment

There are two ways to estimate the fact of imprisonment’s effects on crime. First, one could compare the subsequent levels of criminal activity of individuals convicted of similar crimes who are sentenced to noncustodial sanctions (e.g., probation, house arrest) and custodial sanctions (e.g., prison incarceration, jail incarceration). Second, one could compare the subsequent levels of criminal activity of individuals convicted of similar crimes who are given long and short sentences. A 2009 meta-analysis by Nagin and colleagues (2009) considered both of these possibilities and suggested null or mildly criminogenic effects of being sentenced to prison relative to receiving a noncustodial sanction and length of confinement, contingent on being imprisoned. As such, the best available evidence in 2009 strongly supported the idea that the fact of imprisonment was mildly criminogenic or had no effect on criminal activity.²

¹ Some research considers how extremely long-term imprisonment can shape the desistance process (Kazemian, 2019, p. 41). However, attention here is focused on differences in sentences for individuals likely to be released at some point in their life when they could still plausibly be criminally active. As a result, this section conceptualizes the effects of imprisonment length within the confines of, for instance, 10 years relative to eight, rather than 30 years relative to 25.

² Evidence from Green and Winik (2010), which considered these factors simultaneously, mirrored these conclusions.

More recent follow-ups that examine whether prison or jail incarceration increases, decreases, or has no effect on criminal activity relative to a noncustodial sanction support the hypothesis that imprisonment has no effect on criminal activity (Loeffler, 2013; Mitchell et al., 2017) or increases crime (Bales & Piquero, 2012; Harding et al., 2017). All of these studies relied on future contact with the criminal justice system as a measure of recidivism — a potentially problematic source of measurement bias that will be discussed shortly. However, one study did differentiate effects on convictions for new crimes from effects on parole and probation violations (Harding et al., 2017). This study found that imprisonment did not affect the probability of committing a new crime; instead, all of the effects on crime were concentrated in technical violations of parole (Harding et al., 2017). Given this finding, the evidence seems especially strong that the fact of imprisonment has no average effect on criminal activity, even if it does increase the risk of reimprisonment.

Recent follow-ups on sentence length, contingent upon imprisonment, also generally support the idea that imprisonment has little effect on subsequent crime. In one especially relevant study, Mears and colleagues (2016) found that the first and second years roughly offset in terms of effects on criminal activity and that there are no discernible effects of sentence length on imprisonment after the second year. As a result, the most recent evidence supports the idea that there are minimal effects of sentence length on criminal activity — and provides no evidence for the hypothesis that long sentences decrease crime.

Nature of Imprisonment

Although there is a host of conditions of confinement that could shape desistance from crime (Wildeman, Fitzpatrick, & Goldman, 2018), much of the existing literature focuses on using a regression discontinuity approach³ to test how placement in a higher-security facility relative to a lower-security facility affects the risk of recidivism. In general, this research finds that placement in a higher-security facility tends to have no effect on the risk of recidivism or to marginally increase the risk of recidivism (Chen & Shapiro, 2007; Drago, Galbiati, & Vertova, 2009; Gaes & Camp, 2009). Some research speculates that exposure to more peers who are criminally engaged may drive these effects; however, no study to date has sufficiently analyzed possible mediators to know with certainty what is driving this relationship. And although there is now a growing literature on how conditions of confinement moderate the effects of prison and jail incarceration, and on the need to focus more on conditions of confinement (Kreager & Kruttschnitt, 2018), the reality is that we still know little about how conditions of confinement in the United States shape the desistance process. This research gap has implications for both policymakers and practitioners.

Recent analyses in Denmark combined registry data with data on conditions of confinement and shed light on how relevant conditions of confinement might be for criminal activity. Using a difference-in-differences framework, which is one of the most rigorous methods that can be used to tease out causal effects absent an experimental setup, one recent article showed that individuals who are placed in solitary confinement, even for a short period of time while incarcerated, are about 10 percentage points more likely to be convicted of committing a new crime in the three years following release than matched individuals who are not placed in solitary confinement (Wildeman & Andersen, 2020). Solitary confinement is obviously extreme in terms of conditions of confinement. Nonetheless, this article shows that a greater focus on how conditions of confinement moderate the effects of incarceration could be extremely useful.

Effects of Incarceration on Life-Course Outcomes

Although crime is, of course, a core indicator of desistance, there is a host of other social conditions that tend to come along with desistance from crime (Laub & Sampson, 2003; Maruna, 2001). This section summarizes findings from existing research on how prison and jail incarceration affect four life-course outcomes likely tied to the desistance process: labor market attachment and success, family life, housing (in)stability, and mental health.⁴ Before discussing

³ In most of the research in this area, this approach is used to compare the outcomes of individuals with slightly higher risk scores who were placed in a higher-security facility to those of individuals with slightly lower risk scores who were placed in a lower-security facility.

⁴ This is not meant to be an exhaustive list of possible consequences of prison and jail incarceration. The focus here is on outcomes that are either certainly or almost certainly linked with the desistance process. For a more complete review of the literature that considers these effects, see Kirk and Wakefield (2018).

these findings, it is worth noting that many of the studies are based on self-reports of incarceration and the outcome of interest. They also provide more meaningful insight into the effects of short prison and jail stays than longer stints and provide more associational insight than causal insight.

As sociologists have long argued (Pager, 2003; Western, 2002), incarceration could be associated with poor labor market outcomes through selection (no causal effect), the stigma attached to incarceration (causal effect), and transformations to individuals — whether in the form of lost human capital or behavioral transformations — that make them less likely to flourish in the labor market (causal effect). Research shows that labor market attachment is essential to the desistance process (Laub & Sampson, 2003; Maruna, 2001); subsequently, poor labor market outcomes have the potential to impede the desistance process.

Early research tended to show that prison and jail incarceration led to a 10% to 30% decrease in earnings (Western, 2002, 2007) and that the stigma attached to a criminal record explained some of that association (Pager, 2003). More recent research finds either no effect on labor market outcomes (Loeffler, 2013) or effects that are concentrated among individuals who were formerly incarcerated and had some presentence history in the formal labor market (Harding et al., 2018). One study offers evidence that imprisonment could lead to short-term increases in labor market activity for those with little labor market engagement previously; however, these positive labor market effects receded within a relatively short period of time (Harding et al., 2018).

Research also shows that strong family ties tend to promote desistance (Sampson & Laub, 1990; Warr, 1998). As a result, if incarceration damages family ties, then it could impede the desistance process. Ethnographic research on the effects of imprisonment on family ties paints a complex, generally negative portrait: Although incarceration has some short-term benefits for families when individuals are spiraling out of control (absent interventions from social services), the long-term effects are largely negative (Braman, 2004; Comfort, 2008). Quantitative research on the effects of incarceration — almost regardless of the outcome considered — finds the same basic pattern. Although the effects of incarceration on the transition into marriage remain contested, there is a general consensus that incarceration increases the risk of union dissolution, largely driven by the time spent apart from each other (Lopoo & Western, 2005; Massoglia, Remster, & King, 2011).

Relatively few individuals who experience incarceration are married at the time of their arrest. Thus, deciphering the effects of incarceration mandates a more nuanced investigation of how it shapes their contributions to family life and any negative repercussions. Mothers who have children with a man who experienced incarceration, for instance, report much lower levels of paternal contributions to family life (Turney & Wildeman, 2013); this pattern is observable not only for engagement in family life but also with direct financial contributions (Geller, Garfinkel, & Western, 2011). Although much of the research focuses on family consequences for children and mothers (Wakefield & Wildeman, 2013; Wildeman, Schnittker, & Turney, 2012), the family strains caused by incarceration would also likely get in the way of family support for the desistance process (but see also Sampson, 2011).

Although very little research has considered the effects of housing instability, it is clear that severe levels of material deprivation — such as those indicated by homelessness — could impede the desistance process. It is also well-documented that individuals who are released from a correctional facility experience high rates of homelessness and housing instability (Herbert, Morenoff, & Harding, 2015; Metraux & Culhane, 2004; Western et al., 2016; Western, 2018). Relatively little research provides strong evidence on how incarceration affects housing instability and homelessness, but the little available evidence suggests that incarceration increases the housing insecurity of fathers living in urban areas (Geller & Curtis, 2011). This evidence is far from definitive; nonetheless, it does indicate another channel through which incarceration could impede the desistance process.

Many individuals with documented mental health problems desist from crime; however, an increase in mental health problems seems especially unlikely to facilitate the desistance process. As a result — to the degree that prison and jail incarceration exacerbate mental health problems — this would suggest another mechanism through which incarceration could impede the desistance process. In the most complete assessment to date, Schnittker and colleagues (2012) showed that a history of incarceration is associated — possibly causally so — with a range of mood disorders, including dysthymia, bipolar disorder, and major depressive disorder. Other research has shown that even if there are short-term benefits of incarceration for some mental health problems (but see Wildeman, Schnittker, &

Turney, 2012), the preponderance of evidence suggests that a history of incarceration harms mental health (Massoglia & Pridemore, 2015; Turney, Wildeman, & Schnittker, 2012).

Although a large body of research considers the consequences of incarceration for core life-course outcomes, it is nonetheless important to remember that much of this research relies on self-reports for both criminal justice contact and life-course outcomes. Further, the research is better situated to estimate the effects of jail incarceration than prison incarceration, and it tends to use research designs that are less able to yield causal effects of incarceration than would be ideal for policymakers and practitioners.

Likely Effects of Incarceration on the Desistance Process

Existing research thus suggests that prison and jail incarceration have negative effects on a series of life-course outcomes that are relevant for the desistance process. These include, but are not limited to, worse labor market outcomes, more troubles in their families, higher levels of housing instability, and worse mental health. In light of this evidence, even if incarceration did not impede the desistance process in the several years after release from a correctional facility, it would be reasonable to expect incarceration to indirectly get in the way of desistance.

How Incarceration Affects Desistance Among Individuals Who Chronically Offend

Although research on the effects of incarceration on crime and other life-course outcomes provides insight into the ways in which incarceration could influence the desistance process among individuals who are chronically engaged in criminal activity, there are four core gaps in the literature that make it difficult to fully conceptualize these effects. First — and probably most importantly — none of the existing research on the consequences of incarceration focuses on individuals who are chronically active in crime. Instead, many of these studies look more broadly at all individuals who come into contact with prisons and jails. Second, none of the research on the effects of incarceration on crime actually measures crime, much less desistance. Instead, it focuses on measures of additional criminal justice contact. Third, very little research provides insight into how conditions of confinement moderate the desistance process. Finally, none of the classic studies of desistance use data from individuals who were actively engaged in criminal activity during what some call the era of “mass imprisonment” (Garland, 2001). This is problematic because many of the processes highlighted as driving the desistance process in earlier work may not apply to these cohorts.

Inattention to Individuals Who Are Chronically Active in Crime

Of the many gaps in our knowledge about how incarceration shapes the desistance process, the lack of emphasis on individuals who chronically engage in crime is almost certainly the most serious.

Life-course criminology — and its study of the criminal careers of those who chronically offend — has long formed a core of the criminology discipline. The literature on crime and the life-course is voluminous and has recently been reviewed elsewhere (Farrington, Kazemian, & Piquero, 2019). Essential to any discussion of life-course criminology is the work of criminologists in adopting the concept of a criminal career to explore criminality over time, as well as a developmental framework to examine the concentration and early pathways of crime among individuals with a specific set of risk factors. For example, Blumstein and colleagues are well known for their contributions to understanding criminal careers (Blumstein et al., 1986; Blumstein, Cohen, & Farrington, 1988; Piquero, Farrington, & Blumstein, 2003). Also, West and Farrington’s Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development is a leading example of the developmental risk-factor approach, highlighting the onset and long-term patterns of antisocial and criminal behavior in a cohort of working-class London boys born in the 1950s (West & Farrington, 1977; Piquero, Farrington, & Blumstein, 2007).

Research on persons who chronically offend provides support for four central conclusions. First, they engage in relatively high levels of often-serious criminal activity for an extended period of time. Second, although there are some life-course-persistent individuals — those who simply do not desist from crime at any point in their lives —

most persons who chronically offend do eventually desist from crime (Laub & Sampson, 2003; Moffitt, 1993). Third, contact with the criminal justice system — both lower-level contacts like arrests and higher-level contacts like jail and prison incarceration — are common for this group from a relatively young age. Finally, they tend to have lower levels of prosocial ties to educational institutions, families, religious institutions, prosocial friends, and the labor market than others who either do not engage in crime or engage in crime at a lower rate. Thus, persons who chronically offend differ from other members of society, on average, in a host of ways that may be relevant for the desistance process.

The unique features of persons who chronically offend make their desistance process especially important to understand for a number of reasons. Because these individuals commit such a large share of crimes in society, it is critical not only that they eventually desist from crime but, especially, that they do so quickly. Prisons and jails may provide an important intervention point for these individuals in the desistance process, whether for good or ill, as those who chronically offend are simultaneously very likely to come into contact with the correctional system and very unlikely to have much exposure to forces that can facilitate desistance. As a result, it is important to know how prison and jail incarceration does — or does not — affect their desistance process.

Although this paper focuses on the American criminal justice system, it is worth pointing out, albeit briefly, that a series of experimental interventions in the lives of individuals who chronically engage in crime in Denmark provide important insight into the causal effect of short prison incarcerations (almost always less than a year) relative to noncustodial sanctions (including community service and electronic monitoring). Research from a series of policy changes in Denmark provides strong causal evidence that even short stints of imprisonment increase welfare dependence (Andersen & Andersen, 2014), the risk of union dissolution (Fallesen & Andersen, 2017), and the risk of conviction for a new crime (Andersen, 2015). The Danish and American contexts differ markedly, of course, but because the Danish incarceration rate is so much lower than that of the United States, it is reasonable to assume that the population of persons incarcerated in Denmark is likely heavily made up of those who chronically offend. Thus, the estimates of these studies can offer insight into the likely effects of imprisonment on the desistance process for persons who chronically offend in the United States.

Measurement of Crime, Criminal Justice Contact, and Desistance

As with classic research on desistance (Laub & Sampson, 2003; Maruna, 2001), most contemporary research conceptualizes desistance as both a departure from criminal activity, which may be slow or intermittent, and a shift in prosocial dimensions that often accompanies — and possibly drives — declines in criminal activity (Rocque, 2021). Unfortunately, virtually all research on how incarceration affects the desistance process (1) relies on official measures of criminal justice contact rather than criminal activity and (2) has a relatively short follow-up — often less than three years.

The sole use of administrative data from the criminal justice system is problematic for three reasons. First, administrative data on technical violations of parole, which are sometimes used as the outcome of interest (for a critique, see Harding et al., 2017), provide information not on new crimes but on a failure to follow the conditions of parole. Consequently, these measures provide little insight into crime. Second — and as highlighted by another paper in this volume (Rocque, 2021) — the desistance process often includes fluctuations in criminal activity. A reliance on official criminal justice data, often including individuals who are on parole, does not offer the possibility of measuring multiple criminal episodes because virtually every person who violates the technical conditions of his or her parole, or is convicted of a new crime, will be sent back to a correctional facility. Hence, there will not be a chance to reoffend. Third, and maybe most importantly, given racial, ethnic, class, and gender disparities in criminal justice contact that are not driven solely by disparities in criminal activity (Travis, Western, & Redburn, 2014), our understanding of how the desistance process varies across core points of social stratification is biased — potentially heavily biased — by focusing exclusively on criminal justice contact rather than crime.

The focus on relatively short follow-up periods is also problematic. As previous research indicates, the desistance process often takes years (Laub & Sampson, 2003; Maruna, 2001). Thus, there are reasons to expect that a short window of time, such as a handful of years, is insufficient for measuring desistance.

Inattention to Conditions of Confinement

Conditions of confinement represent a key force in shaping the well-being of individuals during and after their incarceration (Travis, Western, & Redburn, 2014; Walker, 2016). But existing research on how incarceration affects the desistance process provides very limited insight into the degree to which conditions of confinement could moderate the effects of incarceration.

This lack of evidence is problematic for four reasons. First, as noted above, conditions of confinement have the potential to shape the well-being of individuals both during the time they are incarcerated and after their release. This is the case for crime and a host of other outcomes (e.g., labor market outcomes, family life, housing stability, mental health) that often come with desistance from crime. As a result, understanding how in-facility programming and more mundane conditions (e.g., the amount of natural light, the quality of food) shape different outcomes is crucial for understanding the desistance process.

Second, conditions of confinement are, with some notable exceptions, readily modifiable without political intervention in ways that many other features of the criminal justice system are not. Heads of departments of corrections, wardens, and other practitioners working in correctional facilities have the opportunity to “tinker” with prison and jail conditions in ways that could ostensibly benefit people who are incarcerated and then evaluate those changes. This is not the case when it comes to altering prison sentences, jail sentences, and noncustodial sanctions, however.⁵

Third, the prison and jail conditions that individuals experience while incarcerated can be tied to their probability of desisting from crime and potentially lead to scalable changes because some features of prison and jail life are the same everywhere — or at least are sufficiently similar on many key dimensions everywhere.

Finally, the incarceration period may be the only opportunity for a state institution to help divert people — especially those who chronically engage in crime — from their criminal activities. As a vast body of research shows, individuals who are chronically involved in criminal activity tend not to engage with a range of prosocial institutions. As a result, prisons and jails may, sadly, be the place in which this population is most likely to receive services. Because this may be one of the few times the state engages with individuals who chronically engage in crime, it is ideal to gather as much data as possible on “what works” in correctional settings.

A Mismatch of Samples

There is a core limitation in the literature that makes it difficult for researchers to precisely estimate the effects of imprisonment on the desistance process: Many of the datasets used are from a sufficiently different time period, which limits their utility for understanding the contemporary desistance process.

Consider the example of Laub and Sampson (2003). The cohort of boys they studied came of age in an era that differed in at least three central ways from our current society. First, marriage, stable employment, and military service — three of the central turning points highlighted in their work on the desistance process — are less prevalent now among marginalized populations than they would have been for the youth they studied.⁶ It is unclear what processes, if any, have replaced these on the pathway to desistance.

Second, incarceration in prison and jail has become dramatically more common in the contemporary era (Blumstein & Cohen, 1973; Western, 2007). Thus, the life-course would have proceeded differently for those who chronically offended in the Glueck study (Glueck & Glueck, 1950) on which Laub and Sampson relied than it would for the contemporary person who chronically offends.

⁵ The Pennsylvania Department of Corrections is an exemplar in this regard, as it both consistently seeks to modify conditions of confinement to help individuals who are incarcerated and rigorously evaluates the modifications.

⁶ Although military service remains common in the United States, restrictions on military service for some types of criminal records interact with high rates of incarceration in poor, minority neighborhoods in ways that make military service a less viable turning point for many individuals who chronically offend in contemporary society.

Finally, the Glueck cohort was primarily composed of non-Hispanic white males. In addition to the fact that many of the opportunities available to these men would not have been available in the same degree for African Americans, Hispanics, Asians, and Native Americans at that time (leading the study to provide estimates that do not generalize well to the population at the time), it is also worth noting that these cohorts no longer represent the diversity of contemporary society (leading the study to provide estimates that also do not generalize well to society now).

Likely Effects of Incarceration on the Desistance Process for Persons Who Chronically Offend

Although there are limitations in existing research, there is still sufficient evidence to speculate about the likely effects of prison and jail incarceration on the desistance process for individuals who chronically engage in criminal activity. This group differs in core ways from other individuals at risk of prison or jail incarceration, and so it is worth considering ways in which the effects of incarceration on the desistance process might differ for them.

Thinking in terms of the areas discussed earlier in this paper — criminal justice contact, labor market outcomes, family life, housing instability, and mental health — there is no a priori reason to expect those who chronically offend to respond better to the prison or jail environment than other individuals. However, research does suggest that because persons who chronically offend may be sufficiently disengaged from family life and the labor market, they may experience fewer negative consequences in those domains than other individuals who experience prison or jail incarceration. And, indeed, there are reasons to expect that prison and jail incarceration may actually be more damaging for persons who chronically offend than for others since they have less support after release. It would be realistic, then, to think that the effects of prison and jail incarceration on the desistance process for this group would generally be negative. At the same time, more research is sorely needed to isolate these effects.

Implications for Policy

This paper's findings present an interesting dilemma for policymakers. On the one hand, the research summarized here provides a strong argument for decreasing rates of prison and jail incarceration. This is the case for three reasons. First, incarceration is expensive, especially with the extensive programming needed to help persons who chronically offend use incarceration as a positive turning point. These costs, moreover, are especially relevant given the likely substantial cuts that will continue to come to state and local budgets in the wake of the global pandemic. Second, it appears that prison and jail incarceration impede prosocial engagement in a range of domains among people who were formerly incarcerated. These significant social costs must be considered. Third, and most importantly, the findings suggest that the fact, duration, and severity of prison and jail incarceration all likely decrease the probability of desistance — or at least significantly delay it — and increase the risk of recidivism. As a result, the long-term effects of prison and jail incarceration on persons who chronically offend seem likely to cost more money in the long term (in terms of both the costs of crime and the costs of incarceration) than would noncustodial sanctions, shorter periods of prison and jail incarceration, and incarceration in less severe conditions.⁷

Yet policymakers must also consider the short-term costs of not incarcerating persons who chronically offend, costs that significantly complicate any policy discussion. Although there are few policy reasons to object to less severe prison conditions or shorter sentences for those who chronically offend — as these would likely cost the state less money and not lead to any discernible increase in criminal activity in society — there may be concern about the risks of crime associated with imposing noncustodial sanctions on these individuals during their criminally active years. Few, if any, studies test for these short-term effects — the costs of crimes taking place while individuals serve out the noncustodial conditions of their sentences — and, consequently, it is difficult to decipher how the short-term costs compare to the long-term costs associated with imprisonment's negative effects on desistance.

Although the evidence on the effects of incarceration on desistance among persons who chronically offend remains partial, there are nonetheless three core takeaways for policymakers. First, shorter sentences are likely to save

⁷ These arguments, moreover, likely apply to an even greater degree to individuals who currently experience prison and jail incarceration but who do not display the patterns of criminal activity that persons who chronically offend do. This is the case because virtually all of the long-term benefits discussed for those who chronically offend would also apply to the broader spectrum of individuals who engage in crime, but the short-term costs for individuals who engage in less criminal activity would likely be far lower than for those who chronically offend.

money in both the short term and the long term, with minimal short-term costs in terms of increased crime and potentially significant long-term savings in terms of decreased crime. Second, less severe conditions of confinement will likely promote desistance after release. And because higher-level facilities are more expensive to run, shifting more individuals to lower-security facilities could yield short- and long-term savings. The evidence is insufficient when it comes to whether noncustodial sentences are appropriate for persons who chronically offend because current research does not simultaneously consider the short- and long-term costs and savings in terms of crime, incarceration, and other prosocial engagements that tend to come with desistance.

Implications for Practice

The findings from this paper also have implications for practitioners working in correctional, probation, and parole settings. Any shift toward less punitive sanctions for persons who chronically offend will likely lead to increased levels of positive engagement from practitioners. Although this section focuses on individuals already working in the criminal justice system, the reality is that a broader investment in improving the conditions of confinement and conditions of probation and parole will also rely on practitioners in the public health and social welfare systems.

If we move away from custodial sanctions in favor of noncustodial sanctions, the implications for practitioners working in the probation system would be most crucial, as the average level of criminal activity — and other poor life-course outcomes — among persons on probation would likely increase. Three key implications for practice spring from this. First, probation officers would have to become comfortable revoking probation less consistently for technical violations of probation to keep persons who chronically offend and are diverted from the correctional system from rapidly being sent there for a technical violation. Second, the breadth and depth of training for probation officers would have to be significantly increased to help serve this vulnerable population, or there would need to be a movement toward a shared model of case management in probation that also relies on the expertise of practitioners working in medical and social work settings. Third — and maybe most importantly — if the number of persons who chronically offend and are on probation increases, it would be more difficult to move the average individual on probation toward desistance. Therefore, local agencies should decrease the caseloads each probation officer manages.⁸

Although shifting more persons who chronically offend into less restrictive criminal justice settings would likely have the most severe implications for practitioners working in the probation system (and, albeit to a lesser degree, the parole system), this change would also have implications for individuals who manage and work inside of prisons and jails. For individuals who work in the prison system, shorter sentences and less restrictive conditions (when possible) have implications for programming and safety within prisons. On each front, the key to managing this shift in the composition of persons incarcerated is to make it slowly and gradually, with an eye on the level that is most manageable within each different type of institution. Regardless of how slowly the shift is made, it is crucial — for both safety within correctional settings and reentry outcomes after release, including desistance from crime — that practitioners who manage and work in prisons invest deeply in improving the conditions of confinement however they can. This will improve the mundane details of prison incarceration and focus on what works in improving post-release outcomes.

For individuals who manage and work in the jail system, the implications for practice are even more complex and dovetail with policy. Successfully incorporating persons who chronically offend into jail systems will pose some significant challenges. Specifically, jail systems will need to decide whether they have the resources to offer the quick, high-intensive programming needed to prepare these individuals for release. If they are unable to do so, they must decide whether it is more appropriate to push for a system in which short prison stays or noncustodial sanctions are preferred over jail stays within their jurisdiction, or to shift individuals sentenced to jail time to another system that is able to offer such programming. Thus, on a practice level, jail systems will need to decide whether they are ready and willing to incorporate more persons who chronically offend. If they are, a more coordinated spectrum of care that builds on local experts in the medical and social work systems will be a crucial step for local jails.

⁸ Many of these arguments would also apply to individuals working in the parole system, but this section focuses more on the probation system because the changes in the probation system may be more jarring to practitioners.

In short, a broad suite of programs during imprisonment is needed to facilitate desistance, given both the findings on the well-being of those who chronically offend prior to imprisonment, which highlighted the many ways these individuals struggle prior to experiencing criminal justice contact, and the need for them to “make good” after release from prison. Individuals who chronically engage in crime and receive noncustodial sanctions will especially need services because they must begin the desistance process immediately or risk custodial sanctions. As a result, any move away from higher-security facilities, longer prison and jail sentences, and custodial sanctions will likely place a significant demand on parole officers, probation officers, and individuals working in correctional settings.

Avenues for Future Research

The lack of a significant body of research on how imprisonment shapes the desistance process for persons who chronically offend calls for a substantial investment in research that:

- Extends several Bureau of Justice Statistics data holdings to provide more direct insight into this question.
- Provides rigorous evidence on how conditions of confinement moderate the effects of imprisonment on the desistance process for this population.
- Extends both general population and high-risk longitudinal studies of youth later in the life-course by using survey data to consider these questions.

Each has the potential to resolve the four problems with existing research documented earlier.

The remainder of this paper discusses how next steps in each of these three areas could enhance our understanding of how imprisonment shapes the desistance process for persons who chronically offend. Specifically, research in the field would benefit from (1) using existing criminal justice data to address these questions by supplementing the data with information on criminal activity and core indicators of desistance, (2) discussing the conditions of confinement that could promote desistance among those who chronically offend, and (3) supplementing existing data that focus on youth involved in the juvenile justice system or a population sample that has a sufficiently large number of persons who chronically offend to shed new light on this relationship.⁹

More Targeted Use of Existing Datasets

Although existing data have core limitations, the Bureau of Justice Statistics collects at least two datasets that could be used in a more targeted way to consider the effects of imprisonment on criminal activity among persons who chronically offend: the National Corrections Reporting Program (NCRP) and the Recidivism of State Prisoners Studies (RSP).

According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics (n.d.-a), the NCRP “collects offender-level administrative data annually on prison admissions and releases, and yearend custody populations, and on parole entries and discharges in participating jurisdictions. Demographic information, conviction offenses, sentence length, minimum time to be served, credited jail time, type of admission, type of release, and time served are collected from individual prisoner records. The collection began in 1983 and is conducted annually. Beginning in 1999, jurisdictions also began providing a stock file for all inmates held at yearend. In 2012, jurisdictions began reporting parole entry data. The number of states submitting data to NCRP has varied over the years, but ... all fifty states provided at least one type of NCRP record in 2011-2014, with 49 submitting data in 2015 and 47 in 2016.”

⁹The National Institute of Justice has made two recent investments in the third area suggested here; therefore, this paper will spend less time discussing this area than the two areas yet to receive a significant investment. See <https://nij.ojp.gov/funding/awards/2020-mu-mu-0017> for an extension of the Rochester Youth Development Study and <https://nij.ojp.gov/funding/awards/2020-jx-fx-0002> for an extension of the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods. Although neither of these awards is heavily focused on the effects of incarceration on desistance among persons who chronically offend, both could address those research questions.

Unlike the NCRP, which has been collected continuously for nearly 40 years, the RSP has been collected only three times: in 1983 (in 11 states), 1994 (in 15 states), and 2005 (in 30 states) (Bureau of Justice Statistics, n.d.-b). The goal has been to link a sample of individuals who were released from prison in a specific year to their subsequent arrest, conviction, and incarceration experiences in the three (1983 and 1994) to nine (2005) years following release. As with the NCRP, the data are administrative in nature. Recidivism is reported only in the state in which the individual most recently served time in prison, leading estimates from this survey to be somewhat conservative.

Currently, the data collected in the NCRP and RSP only consider criminal justice contact, not criminal activity. However, three features of the datasets make them well-suited for expansion to provide insight into the desistance process. First, both datasets contain extensive information about the criminal justice contacts of individuals who are on the cusp of release from prison. Thus, it is possible to identify latent classes of offending that map onto the categorization research has used to define chronic offending (Loughran, Nagin, & Nguyen, 2017; Nagin, 2005). Second, the large number of individuals included in both the NCRP and RSP would allow for extensive testing of the effect of sentence length on offending across the life-course. Third, both datasets include significant variation in time served, which is driven by temporal and geographic differences in sentence length and the proportion of a sentence that must be served prior to release. Thus, plausibly exogenous variation in time served could potentially be identified to estimate causal effects.

Although prior analyses have used the NCRP and RSP to answer an array of criminological questions, these data have been underused for considering the consequences of imprisonment on the criminal activity of persons who chronically offend and could be extended markedly. One possible way to expand the NCRP or RSP would be to choose a random sample¹⁰ of individuals who have just been released from prison and track them for many years following their release. All (or virtually all) individuals in the sample had been criminally active at some point in their lives, and so even a relatively small cohort (500 to 1,000 individuals) would provide significant insight into the relationship between imprisonment, chronic offending, and desistance from crime because many would eventually be reimprisoned, continue offending but not be imprisoned, or desist from criminal activity. A survey that includes information on criminal activity and social circumstances (e.g., marriage, housing stability, employment) — preferably that was conducted frequently to map changes in social circumstances to changes in criminal activity and recidivism (Horney, Osgood, & Marshall, 1995) — could increase scientific knowledge in this area in a potentially low-cost way.¹¹

Greater Focus on Conditions of Confinement

A recent review of the research on conditions of confinement in federal prisons, state prisons, and local jails called for a more intensive focus on how conditions of confinement moderate the effects of imprisonment (Wildeman, Fitzpatrick, & Goldman, 2018). Although there is a large body of research on how the severity of prison conditions (Gaes & Camp, 2009; Wildeman & Andersen, 2020) and the level of access to various types of in-prison programming (Chappell, 2004; Pompoco et al., 2017) shape post-release recidivism risks, very little of this research has directly considered persons who chronically offend.¹² Further, the range of conditions of confinement that

¹⁰ It could also be reasonable to stratify by the consistency and severity of criminal justice contact.

¹¹ Of course, any data collection effort like this must manage a tradeoff between cost and attrition. As such, there are a number of features of any data collection effort in this area that merit discussion. First, and most importantly, participating individuals would need to know that an independent research team was conducting the survey and that their confidential data would not be shared with correctional officials. Absent such assurances, it seems unlikely that any data collection effort would be successful, especially since it would likely be seen as coercive, causing ethical problems. Second, data collection costs vary massively across data collection mechanisms (Sugie, 2018; Western et al., 2016); it would be important for the National Institute of Justice to conduct a pilot study in which three or four of the most promising mechanisms for facilitating participation among marginalized programs are compared to ensure that the most cost-effective methods for retaining the sample are used. Absent a pilot data collection effort like this, any new data collection effort would likely include either a smaller sample than would be ideal (because a high-cost method was used) or a higher attrition rate than would be ideal (because a lower-cost method that was not proven effective was used). Although it would be ideal for such a pilot to be broadly representative, it may be more realistic to instead partner with a state that has shown interest in collaborations with outside researchers (i.e., Pennsylvania) to keep the pilot costs reasonable.

¹² Few studies doing primary data collection in correctional settings have worked with persons who chronically offend, which may be partially due to a reluctance on the part of departments of corrections to allow access to higher-security facilities. For example, Kreager and colleagues (2017, p. 82) drew their sample from a “good behavior” unit.

¹³ Although there are many excellent examples of such collaborations, one recent example is the Prison Inmate Networks Study (PINS).

Table 1. A Partial List of Conditions of Confinement

Space	Routine	People
Cell/sleeping area	Programming	Persons incarcerated
Shared/single	Educational	Cell/bunk mates
Square footage	Basic education	Program/group activity
Crowding	GED	participants
Percent in solitary/segregated housing	College level	Attorneys/legal staff
Common recreational area(s)	Vocational	Department of Corrections personnel
Indoors	Life skills/personal improvement	Heads of department of corrections
Outdoors	Religious activities/organizations	Correctional officers
Cafeteria	Leisure time	Wardens
Programming/work rooms	Television	Parole boards
Bathrooms	Reading material	
Light	Exercise/physical activity	
Artificial/natural	Sleep	
Noise level	Outside contact	Corporate leadership (private prisons)
Daytime	Mail	
Nighttime	Calls/phone use	Other facility personnel
Cleanliness	Visits	Administrative staff
Safety	Services	Programming staff
Temperature	Medical (physical and mental health)	Medical and psychiatric staff
Heating	Behavioral interventions	Chaplain
Air conditioning	Rehabilitative (alcohol, drugs)	
	Meals	
	Nutritional quality	
	Commissary	
	Work assignments	
	Count	
	Being made “orderly”	

Source: Adapted from Wildeman, Fitzpatrick, & Goldman (2018, p. 33).

have been considered to this point is relatively limited. Table 1, which is adapted from an earlier review of research (Wildeman, Fitzpatrick, & Goldman, 2018, p. 33), provides some insight into the conditions of confinement that merit further emphasis.

This research area is promising partially because of data availability. A growing number of state prison systems are showing interest in collaborating with researchers to better understand how their systems promote desistance from crime, among other outcomes, and are providing access to their correctional facilities more broadly (Kreager et al., 2017).¹³ Thus, targeted emphasis on conditions of confinement could be beneficial for both this specific research question and the field of criminology because it could encourage even greater collaboration between academics and correctional systems.

It is important to note that absent some additional data collection that examines criminal activity, studies relying exclusively on administrative data will provide insight not on chronic offending or desistance from crime but on

chronic criminal justice contact and desistance from criminal justice contact. As such, significant data limitations will remain.

Extending Existing Longitudinal Studies

This paper has suggested that to enhance our understanding of how imprisonment shapes the desistance process for persons who chronically offend, researchers should build on existing administrative datasets — in one case, national data holdings from the Bureau of Justice Statistics, and in another case, state- and county-level data on conditions of confinement. Yet this is hardly the only possible path forward. Another way would be to follow in the footsteps of Sampson and Laub's (1993; Laub & Sampson, 2003) extension of the classic Glueck study (Glueck & Glueck, 1950). The logic of Sampson and Laub's path-breaking work is relatively straightforward: Start with a classic study that contains detailed measures from the time children were young, apply the most modern techniques to it, and extend it many years into the future to provide insight into how the desistance process played out for different types of persons who commit or are convicted of committing crimes. The payoff from this extension was great — and, indeed, many of the most important insights on the desistance process stem directly from Sampson and Laub's pioneering work.

There are two core limitations to extending a study in which most of the participants are by now approaching their 100th birthday (Glueck & Glueck, 1950). First, the life-course has been transformed dramatically across recent cohorts — the life-course for more recent cohorts now features very high rates of incarceration and very low rates of violent crime. This transformation, moreover, has been especially profound for young men with low levels of educational attainment, who now experience incarceration at extremely high rates and victimization at lower rates than earlier cohorts. Second, as researchers focusing on mass incarceration have detailed extensively (Western, 2006), these shifts in the broader life-course for men have interacted with dramatic changes in the criminal justice system, making an updated consideration of the later adulthood of persons who chronically offend necessary.

As a result, extending two specific types of studies might be especially fruitful. First, extending some of the classic longitudinal studies of youth involved in the juvenile justice system from the 1970s through the contemporary era, in much the same way Sampson and Laub did, seems like an exceptionally promising avenue (Sampson & Laub, 1993; Laub & Sampson, 2003). These studies include a large number of youth involved in the justice system, many of whom would have developed into persons who chronically offend. Also, many would have experienced long periods of imprisonment. And because the individuals included in these studies would remember contributing extensive data to the original data collections, they would likely be more willing to complete an extensive survey on crime, criminal justice contact, and social conditions than individuals who had not been involved in such a study at an earlier time.

A second type of study that could be extended would include a broader range of information on a more population-representative sample of youth. Although extending this type of sample could have some limitations, it is worth considering for a number of reasons. First, broader longitudinal studies that are not focused exclusively, or even

¹⁴ The Rochester Youth Development Study (RYDS) was started in the late 1980s and was based on a sample of 1,000 youth in the public school system in Rochester, New York, during the 1987-1988 school year. The RYDS oversampled high-risk youth. The initial sample was heavily male (about 70%) and African American (about 70%); the remaining 30% of the sample was roughly evenly split between the Hispanic population and the white population. Assessments included information from both the youth and their primary caregivers, as well as files from the Rochester public schools, police department, probation department, family court, and social services. Interviews were also conducted at about ages 21 and 23; retention rates were high throughout the first two phases of the study, which spanned through young adulthood (Thornberry et al., 2016). In a third phase, additional interviews were conducted when the youth were 29 and 31, leading to a similar age of follow-up as the Pittsburgh Youth Study. These interviews were completed in the early 2000s and included much of the same information that was included in the earlier waves of data collection; information on criminal justice contacts was also included at this time.

¹⁵ The design of the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods (PHDCN) at baseline involved a two-stage procedure (Earls & Buka, 1997). First, a stratified representative sample of 80 neighborhoods was selected in the mid-1990s, representing the variability, especially by race and class, of Chicago neighborhoods. An array of data was collected from each neighborhood, including independent surveys of residents and systematic observations of city streets. Second, a representative sample of eligible children was drawn from a screening of more than 35,000 households in the 80 neighborhoods. Children falling within seven age cohorts at the time — birth (i.e., born 1995-1996) and then every three years until age 18 (i.e., age 3, 6, 9, 12, 15, and 18) — were then sampled from randomly selected households and studied over about six years, from the mid-1990s to the early 2000s (for more details on the design, see Sampson, 2012, pp. 77-93). Because of these procedures, the PHDCN sample was broadly representative of children and adolescents living in a wide range of Chicago neighborhoods in the mid-1990s. The first round (or "wave") of the study included just over 6,200 children who were visited for extensive in-home interviews or assessments, along with interviews with their primary caregivers, starting in late 1994 and running through 1996. Then, at roughly 2.5-year intervals, the research team collected two more waves of data (wave 2 was concentrated in 1997-1999, and wave 3 in 1999-2001).

primarily, on crime and criminal justice contact may yield insight into other factors central to child development that could have important implications for the desistance process but are not included in studies with a narrower focus. Second, because the samples in these longitudinal studies tend to be larger, researchers could potentially design a more thoughtful sampling frame than would be possible with a smaller starting sample, where it would be necessary to include the entire sample to have statistical power. Finally, these samples tend to be more broadly population-representative, so they can help identify persons who chronically offend and may present atypical trajectories or lack many of the risk factors on which researchers have traditionally focused.

There are many studies in both of these domains that would be appropriate to consider extending. However, this paper does not provide an extensive discussion of possible datasets to extend because the National Institute of Justice has already funded extensions of two relevant studies, the Rochester Youth Development Study¹⁴ and the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods.¹⁵ Again, these are not the only two studies that could be used to consider the effects of imprisonment on the desistance process among persons who chronically offend. Studies using additional relevant datasets are also sorely needed.

Conclusion

This paper proceeded in three stages. The first stage reviewed existing research on the consequences of prison and jail incarceration for criminal activity and other core life-course outcomes associated with desistance from crime. The central findings indicated that any prison and jail incarceration, longer prison and jail incarceration, and prison and jail incarceration in a higher-security facility had, at best, no effect on the criminal activity of individuals who experienced those events and, at worst, a criminogenic effect. Because it also appears as though prison and jail incarceration have negative effects on other life-course outcomes, the literature suggests that it is highly likely that the fact, duration, and severity of prison and jail incarceration all impede the desistance process.

The second stage discussed the most central research gaps that exist in this area. Specifically, and most importantly, existing literature on how incarceration affects recidivism and other life-course outcomes does not focus on persons who chronically offend — individuals for whom prison and jail incarceration are most common and the consequences are likely most consequential. Existing research is also limited because it exclusively uses criminal justice contact as a proxy for criminal activity, pays minimal attention to how conditions of confinement moderate the effects of prison and jail incarceration, and relies heavily on data that come from a fundamentally different era than the contemporary one. Despite these limitations, there is little reason to expect that the negative effects of incarceration on the desistance process will be smaller for persons who chronically offend than for other individuals who are incarcerated.

The third and final stage discussed the implications of these findings for policy, practice, and research. For policymakers, the evidence suggests that less punitive sanctions may both save scarce state and federal resources and facilitate the desistance process for individuals who chronically engage in criminal activity. The benefits must be weighed against the costs of crime, however. Because even these individuals rapidly decrease their engagement in crime as they age, policymakers should still strongly consider shorter sentences. This is especially the case in the wake of the deep budget cuts likely due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

For practitioners, a broad suite of available programs during imprisonment is likely needed to facilitate the desistance process, due to both the findings on the well-being of individuals who chronically engage in criminal activity prior to imprisonment and the need for these individuals to “make good” after release from prison. Those who receive noncustodial sanctions are especially likely to need services because they will need to begin the desistance process immediately or risk custodial sanctions.

For researchers, the lack of a significant body of research on how imprisonment shapes the desistance process calls for a substantial investment in research that (1) extends several core Bureau of Justice Statistics studies using a combination of high-quality administrative data and survey data, (2) provides rigorous evidence regarding how conditions of confinement moderate the effects of imprisonment on the desistance process for this population by partnering with state and county systems to marry information on conditions of confinement with research on the

outcomes of individuals who were formerly incarcerated, and (3) extends both general population and high-risk longitudinal studies of youth later in the life-course by using survey data to consider these questions. Although the National Institute of Justice has already made an initial commitment to the final area of research through recent funding decisions, extended funding on the first two areas is still sorely needed.

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About the Author

Christopher Wildeman, Ph.D., is a professor of sociology at Duke University and professor at the ROCKWOOL Foundation Research Unit. His work considers the prevalence, causes, and consequences of contact with the child welfare system and criminal justice system.

