

Desistance from crime

On the frontier of criminal justice research

By Benjamin Adams, M.S., D. Michael Applegarth, M.S.W. and Marie Garcia, Ph.D.

A heightened emphasis on desistance research for the real world

The study of desistance from crime gained prominence in academic criminology in recent decades, advancing theoretical perspectives, measurement and the examination of factors that help explain how and why individuals change their behavior over time. The application and implementation of desistance principles to criminal justice interventions and broader policy and practice has not followed at the same pace. Rigorous evaluations of such interventions are scarce, as are attempts to operationalize and measure desistance at scale in real-world criminal justice contexts and settings. Recidivism remains the primary measure used in research and practice to gauge criminal justice effectiveness and as a marker of individual success or failure. However, there is growing recognition among criminal and juvenile justice stakeholders that desistance research may offer important applications in efforts aimed to reduce crime and improve individual outcomes.



For the National Institute of Justice (NIJ), the scientific research, development and evaluation agency of the U.S. Department of Justice, a heightened focus on the promise of desistance research means advancing innovative and rigorous desistance studies and elevating the national conversation by sharing current knowledge widely with the

field. Helping to guide that are six recently published, foundational NIJ white papers by leading scholars on desistance and related issues.¹ These NIJ papers form a new volume on desistance that will help illuminate promising research that can inform more positive, grounded approaches to facilitating individuals' movement away from crime.

A number of substantive areas identified as gaps by the volume's authors hold promise for guiding new studies that can constructively advance criminal justice policy and practice to promote desistance from crime for those at greatest risk of ongoing justice system involvement. Those areas of opportunity include, for example:

- Including and improving measurement of desistance in basic research and evaluations.
- Studying the application of biosocially informed research to interventions.
- Examining the impact of imprisonment and conditions of confinement on the desistance process, particularly for individuals who chronically offend.
- Addressing real-world constraints that may serve as barriers to the adoption of desistance concepts in practice.
- Considering the contributions and implications of theories and empirical findings about desistance from studies in other countries.
- Exploring what desistance-promoting approaches and a focus on positive outcomes might look like for different system decision points, agencies and stakeholders.

For NIJ, a focus on desistance research is not new. It is, however, intensified in light of emergent scientific insight on how desistance works generally and in various criminal justice settings, and how knowledge of the desistance process at various stages of individuals' lives can tangibly benefit criminal justice policy

and practice in terms of real-world impact on those individuals. NIJ's research portfolio includes investments in studies that have contributed, and continue to contribute, to advancing knowledge and understanding of the process of desistance from crime.²

"Although the theoretical knowledge base provides [a] rich understanding of the key components of desistance, we need more rigorous evaluation on desistance-related approaches"... "We must continue to invest in data collection efforts to support our understanding of how desistance occurs and under what circumstances."

— Jennifer Scherer, Ph.D., Acting Director, National Institute of Justice³

Defining and operationalizing the concept of desistance in criminal justice research

NIJ's new volume suggests desistance is most useful when considered as an individual process of moving away from crime, rather than a singular event. For most individuals, desistance is a natural process over their life course, with risk for antisocial conduct most pronounced during adolescence. But any number of influences or life experiences may advance or impede that movement away from criminality.

Generally, desistance has been accepted to mean the reduction in criminal behavior that occurs after a person reaches adulthood. However, the concept of desistance as applied to policy and practice remains unclear to many, as varying definitions and measurement strategies have evolved over time. Early scholarship

tended to view desistance as an event — that is, the termination of offending or the end of a criminal career. More recent definitions suggest desistance is instead a process by which criminality declines over time. NIJ's volume and the discussion that follows align with this definition.

In the first chapter of the now published desistance volume, Dr. Michael Rocque reviews how desistance has been conceptualized over time. Rocque advances the standard "process" definition by concluding desistance is the "process by which criminality, or the individual risk for anti-social conduct, declines over the life-course, generally after adolescence."⁴

Notably, Rocque establishes the process may be well underway despite the occurrence of criminal behavior. This framing is critical to informing how future research and evaluation efforts might determine which policies and practices influence desistance or not, and to what extent.

Bridging the gap between desistance research and practice

Desistance-centered principles have significant potential to enhance criminal and juvenile justice practices, improve outcomes for systems and communities and better support individuals in their journey toward the discontinuation of criminal behavior. To achieve this potential, the field must bridge the gap between academic knowledge and real-world applications. Dr. Bret Bucklen's chapter considers a range factors that may facilitate or inhibit the use and

implementation of desistance principles in real-world settings.

As previously defined, desistance is a process that occurs over time. Using his work for the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections to introduce measures of desistance alongside standard recidivism reporting, Bucklen suggests practitioners and researchers can partner together to better assess where an individual is in the desistance process and identify what resources and support are vital in maintaining a positive trajectory.⁵ This moves beyond indicating if an individual has “failed” in some way (i.e., recidivated) and examining factors associated with reoffending, and instead considers where a person might be in the process of desisting from criminal behavior.

This application can occur at any stage of system involvement: the time of arrest, filing of charges, pretrial detention or release, case processing, disposition and sentencing, community supervision, incarceration or reentry. Providing the appropriate parties and decision-makers with information on what has been found to support desistance in general and information relevant to where an individual is in the desistance process, as well as recommendations for how to best support them in accelerating desistance, could have profound impacts on their lives and communities.

Providing this information to an arresting officer, prosecutor, judge or community supervision officer could help avoid overly punitive approaches, provide a strength-based lens for them to view individuals through and ideally lead to more informed and evidence-based decision making.

For example, community corrections practices might place a greater emphasis on providing incentives, acknowledging milestones and efforts to change, tailoring conditions to individual needs and reducing the use of incarceration for technical violations. For this to occur at scale, researchers and practitioners must build partnerships designed to implement and evaluate desistance-informed approaches.

NIJ's desistance from crime volume

NIJ's recently released six-chapter volume, *Desistance from Crime: Implications for Research, Policy, and Practice*, aims to further the discussion, knowledge and application of desistance principles within criminal justice policy, practice and research. Two of the chapters, by Drs. Michael Rocque and Bret Bucklen, are noted above. The volume as a whole aims to assist researchers and practitioners to traverse the gap between academic knowledge and real-world applications, give clarity on how desistance is conceptualized, measured and implemented, and provide actionable guidance on the use of desistance principles in current practices throughout the criminal and juvenile justice systems.

The volume is a response to the increased focus within the field, and by the public at large, on improving criminal justice and positive behavioral outcomes, better meeting the needs of individuals with frequent system contact, and refining and reevaluating the standard procedures, methods and assumptions that accompany criminal justice research and practice.

The volume contains the six chapters:

- But What Does It Mean? Defining, Measuring and Analyzing Desistance from Crime in Criminal Justice, by Dr. Michael Rocque
- Biosocial Factors and Their Influence on Desistance, by Dr. Danielle Boisvert
- The Impact of Incarceration on the Desistance Process Among Individuals Who Chronically Engage in Criminal Activity, by Dr. Christopher Wildeman
- Desistance-Focused Criminal Justice Practice, by Dr. Kristofer “Bret” Bucklen
- International Perspectives and Lessons Learned on Desistance, by Dr. Stephen Farrall
- Pathways to Desistance from Crime Among Juveniles and Adults: Applications to Criminal Justice Policy and Practice, by Dr. Lila Kazemian.

Applications of NIJ's desistance volume for research, policy, and practice

Taken together, the NIJ volume on desistance from crime reveals a number of potential directions for future research, with a goal of maximizing impact on policy and practice that can improve individual lives and community safety. What follows are some key research, policy and practice takeaways from each paper.

Meaning of Desistance

Dr. Michael Rocque offers an updated conceptual definition of desistance for use by practitioners,

policymakers and researchers. Throughout his chapter, Dr. Rocque provides practical suggestions on how to conceptualize, measure and evaluate desistance.

Key takeaways include:⁶

- Desistance is a process and should be modeled as such in future research, with consideration given to the goals of the study, sources of available data, time frames and indicators of desistance related to criminality.
- Policymakers will benefit from the application of both qualitative and quantitative knowledge and should seek to support research with extended follow-up periods.
- Practitioners should recognize that criminality (i.e., the propensity to commit crime) provides a more direct indicator of where someone is in the desistance process compared

with the presence or absence of criminal behavior.

Biosocial research applications

Dr. Danielle Boisvert provides an illuminating discussion on how the field of corrections lags behind in the application of knowledge from biosocial research to daily practices. Dr. Boisvert argues the incorporation of this knowledge in new initiatives and interventions has the potential to improve outcomes and better promote the desistance process.

Key takeaways include:⁷

- Interdisciplinary research is needed on the connections between brain development, neuropsychological functions, stress system response and desistance. More study is also needed on how adverse environments and risky lifestyles influence these relationships.
- Stakeholders should evaluate

existing and forthcoming policies' impact on the nutrition, visitation, noise exposure, toxin exposure and overcrowding of individuals who are incarcerated. Research is also needed on ways to support the application of biosocial knowledge to risk assessments, treatment plans and interventions.

- Collaboration between practitioners and researchers is needed in incorporating and evaluating assessments and interventions targeting biosocial factors.

Effect of imprisonment

Dr. Christopher Wildeman considers how imprisonment affects the desistance process for individuals who chronically engage in criminal activity, including disruptions that may be tied to length of stay and conditions of confinement. Dr. Wildeman provides suggestions for shifting policy and practice, and targeting future research investments.

Key takeaways include:⁸

- Research investments are needed to enhance existing statistical collections and the use of available administrative and survey data related to desistance, as well as to extend longitudinal studies of general and high-risk populations.
- Policymakers should focus on alternatives to custodial sanctions, moderating the length of sentences for many individuals and improving the conditions of confinement for all individuals in custody.
- There are broad implications for corrections practitioners and



the ability of the workforce to manage a system that shifts to emphasize noncustodial sanctions, shorter sentences and less punitive approaches to supervision and confinement.

Practitioner perspectives

Dr. Kristofer “Bret” Bucklen examines desistance concepts from a practitioner perspective, reviews evidence for desistance focused interventions and considers real-world challenges to the use and implementation of desistance principles in practice.

Key takeaways include:⁹

- More randomized controlled trials and cost-benefit analyses are needed to establish a stronger empirical evidence base for desistance-focused interventions.
- Policymakers face real-world constraints (time, budgets, messaging) that must be addressed in efforts to effectively translate desistance research into broader policy and practice.
- Justice agencies need practical approaches, for operationalizing and measuring desistance, that can be routinely used and reported and readily understood.

International perspectives

Dr. Stephen Farrall shares an international perspective on the application of desistance principles and the need to alter assessment practices, incorporate a strength-based perspective, address housing and employment needs and implement formal recognition of individuals’ progress.

Key takeaways include:¹⁰

- Researchers could assist shifting assessment practices by

developing items that measure both the negative and positive aspects of individuals’ current circumstances.

- Policymakers should seek ways to increase access to employment and housing, support efforts to help individuals make amends for criminal activity and provide programs informed by desistance principles.
- When possible, practitioners should provide individualized treatment, recognize individuals’ strengths and weaknesses, expect setbacks to occur, nurture individuals’ positive social relationships and support the use of informal and community-based interventions.

Mechanisms underlying desistance

Dr. Lila Kazemian provides an overview of the mechanisms underlying the process of desistance from crime among juveniles and adults, with a focus on implications for different system decision points and agency types, and specific recommendations for moving toward desistance-promoting policy and practice.

Key takeaways include:¹¹

- Continued research is needed to better understand and distinguish indicators of persistence in crime from temporary setbacks in individuals’ lives, to measure positive outcomes and to apply both to models for desistance-promoting approaches.
- Policies informed by desistance research should address issues that may influence individual progress and success, such as

the culpability of emerging adults, the length of prison sentences, the stigma of arrest and criminal records and blanket bans that affect access to housing and employment.

- Agencies and practitioners that want to incorporate desistance research in their work should provide incentives for success, consider changes in individual and social outcomes in addition to behavioral outcomes, purposefully track progress toward desistance and recognize that setbacks are expected in the process.

Conclusion

NIJ’s recent volume on desistance from crime and its ongoing research investments present an opportunity for us all to think critically about how to apply this knowledge in ways that are most likely to accelerate the desistance process for individuals involved with the criminal and juvenile justice systems. The volume also calls for an examination of factors that may disrupt or delay desistance, so that future policy and practice changes better promote desistance and increase community safety. As Dr. Lila Kazemian writes in the final chapter, “No single criminal justice agency can promote desistance on its own.”¹² For desistance initiatives to be successful, establishing and sustaining partnerships across the justice system and with families, community organizations and researchers will be critical. NIJ looks forward to engaging with the field to advance recommendations provided in the volume for research, policy, and practice.

ENDNOTES

¹ National Institute of Justice, *Desistance From Crime: Implications for Research, Policy, and Practice*, Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, November 2021, NCJ 301497. <https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/nij/301497.pdf>

² *Desistance From Crime Over the Life Course, FY2012*: <https://nij.ojp.gov/funding/opportunities/nij-2012-3168>; *Research into Desistance from Crime, FY 2019*: <https://nij.ojp.gov/funding/opportunities/nij-2019-15527>.

³ Jennifer Scherer, Ph.D., “Introduction,” in *Desistance from Crime*, NIJ, at xii.

⁴ Michael Rocque, Ph.D., “But What Does It Mean? Defining, Measuring and Analyzing Desistance from Crime in Criminal Justice,” in *Desistance from Crime*, NIJ, at pg. 12.

⁵ Kristofer “Bret” Bucklen, Ph.D., “Desistance-Focused Criminal Justice Practice,” in *Desistance from Crime*, NIJ, at pg. 121.

⁶ Michael Rocque, at pgs. 1-39.

⁷ Danielle Boisvert, Ph.D., “Biosocial Factors and Their Influence on Desistance,” in *Desistance from Crime*, NIJ, at pgs. 41-79.

⁸ Christopher Wildeman, Ph.D., “The Impact of Incarceration on the Desistance Process Among Individuals Who Chronically Engage in Criminal Activity,” in *Desistance from Crime*, NIJ, at pgs. 81-110.

⁹ Kristofer “Bret” Bucklen, at pgs. 111-134.

¹⁰ Stephen Farrall, Ph.D., “International Perspectives and Lessons Learned on Desistance,” in *Desistance from Crime*, NIJ, at pgs. 135-162.

¹¹ Lila Kazemian, Ph.D., “Pathways to Desistance from Crime Among Juveniles and Adults: Applications to Criminal Justice Policy and Practice,” in *Desistance from Crime*, NIJ, at pgs. 163-213.

¹² Lila Kazemian, at pg. 190.



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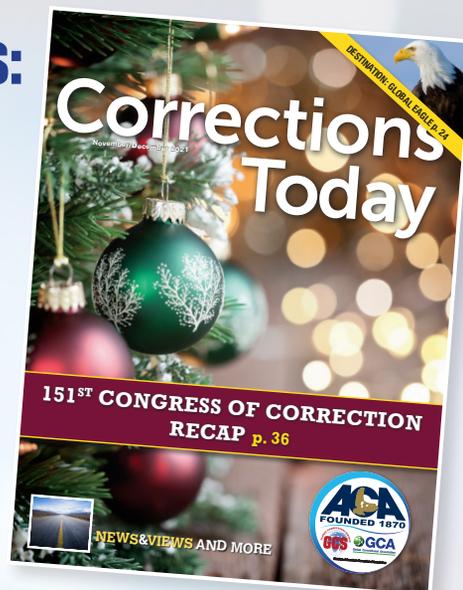
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