

Pathways to Desistence: How Does Criminal Activity Stop?

Much attention has been paid to the young offender who repeatedly offends and continues into adult criminal behaviour. Little effort has been spent on evaluating and understanding those who do not become adult criminals, those who manage to extricate themselves from the juvenile justice system. The cessation of criminal activity has been called desistence.(1)

There is little understanding of the factors that lead to desistence. The processes and factors that lead to initiation and maintenance of criminal activity are not necessarily the same as those leading to its cessation. Those individuals who do change their ways may provide insight and understanding into the nature, process, motivation, protective factors and maintenance of their turnaround. Often, these individuals are referred to as the false positives of delinquency research who, although desisting, were predicted to persist in criminal activity.

Mulvey and LaRosa comment:

...instead of regarding adolescents who do not develop antisocial behavior in later years as false positives in the prediction of maladjustment, they may fruitfully be thought of as true positives in the prediction of recovery.(2)

There exists a need to define those factors which are uniquely capable of predicting desistence.

This study takes a retrospective look at adults who were in trouble with the law as adolescents yet do not pursue adult criminal careers. This article provides a brief overview of the important findings of the quantitative data. (Future research will analyze the qualitative data from the study.)

Several methodological challenges confront someone wanting to study desistence and desisters. The primary challenge is getting access to individuals who were young offenders who have not pursued adult criminal careers. The federal *Freedom of Information Act* and the provincial *Privacy Act* prohibit the use of official records to contact prospective participants without consent. Clinical files do not exist in the public domain and are inaccessible for research purposes.

Research Method

Three newspapers were contacted and asked to run articles on the issue of young offenders who "went straight." In addition, various agencies were contacted and asked to pass on a letter inviting individuals who seemed to meet our criteria to participate in the study. These agencies included the Ministry of Corrections, Probation and Parole, the Change Now Youth Centre and the Ministry of Community and Social Services Group Homes. Potential participants were asked to contact the project office. In each case, guarantees of confidentiality and anonymity were included and stressed. The subjects in this study were paid \$25, which they were unaware of before the interview.

The 20 participants were male and had been young offenders with moderate or serious criminal involvement as adolescents. Adolescence was defined as between 13 and 18 years of age. Participants

were at least 18 years of age at the time of the interview and it had been at least a year since the conclusion of probation or parole.

The extent and seriousness of criminal activity were defined by the number of convictions during adolescence. A minimum of three convictions was required for inclusion in the study.

A semistructured interview(3) was conducted. The interview covered various topics including family, education, history of delinquency, problem behaviour and issues surrounding the process of desistance. The topics were chosen from a survey of the literature; they were not limited to one particular theory.

Results

The men's ages ranged from 23 to 44. Age at last conviction ranged from 14 to 32 years, with the average length of desistance being 10.25 years. The minimum length of desistance was three years. While 60% desisted by age 21, 40% were last convicted later in their adult years (20% in their late twenties or early thirties).

The majority of subjects' parents (70%) were living together when the subjects were 14 years old. Most of the families (55%) experienced alcohol related problems, and 40% had drug problems. While only 15% of the parents had been in trouble with the law, 40% of participants had a sibling who had been in trouble with the law.

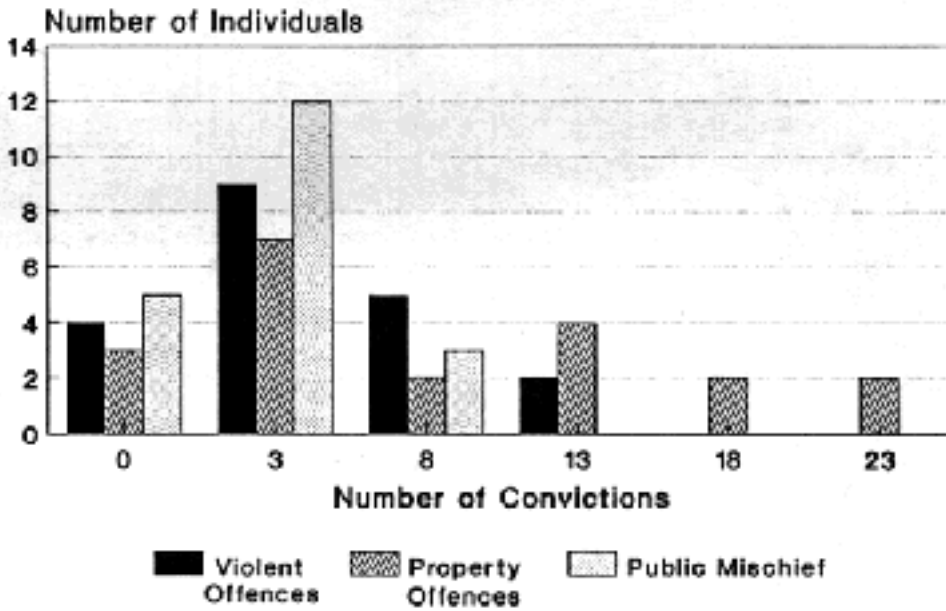
Regarding other family issues, half of our subjects said their family gave them love and affection. Yet only two participants reported that they regularly discussed things that bothered them with their fathers or did things with their fathers. Relationships with mothers seemed to be more positive, with mothers giving help and advice regularly in 70% of the cases.

Subjects were asked to describe their use of alcohol and drugs during pre-adolescence, at age 16 and at the time of the interview. The pattern of drug use for amphetamines closely mirrored that of the use of heroin, barbiturates, tranquillizers and LSD. Collectively, this pattern represented heavy usage, particularly at the age of 16; fourteen participants had been using a broad range of drugs frequently. In contrast, there was a striking absence of drug and alcohol use at the time of the interview, with 18 subjects stating that they no longer used alcohol, marijuana or amphetamines.

In Figure 1, the frequency of offence types and convictions is represented for the adolescent years. Three subjects were not convicted of any property offences; five had no convictions for public mischief; and four had no convictions for violent offences. In total, 17 subjects were convicted of property offences, 15 of public mischief offences and 16 of violent offences.

Figure 1

Figure 1
Frequency of Offences and Convictions
Between 13 and 18 Years of Age



Questions were asked that attempted to focus on the subject's sense of hope and positive outlook for the future after discharge from probation and at the present time. At the conclusion of probation, 60% were doubtful of their ability to avoid future trouble with the law. At the present time, 17 of the 20 reported having a concrete goal for the future, and of those, 15 stated that they would likely achieve their goal.

Subjects also were asked to rank, in descending order, the three influences they regarded as important in their turnaround. The rankings are presented in the table; in Figure 2, the rankings have been summarized to give a more overall measure.

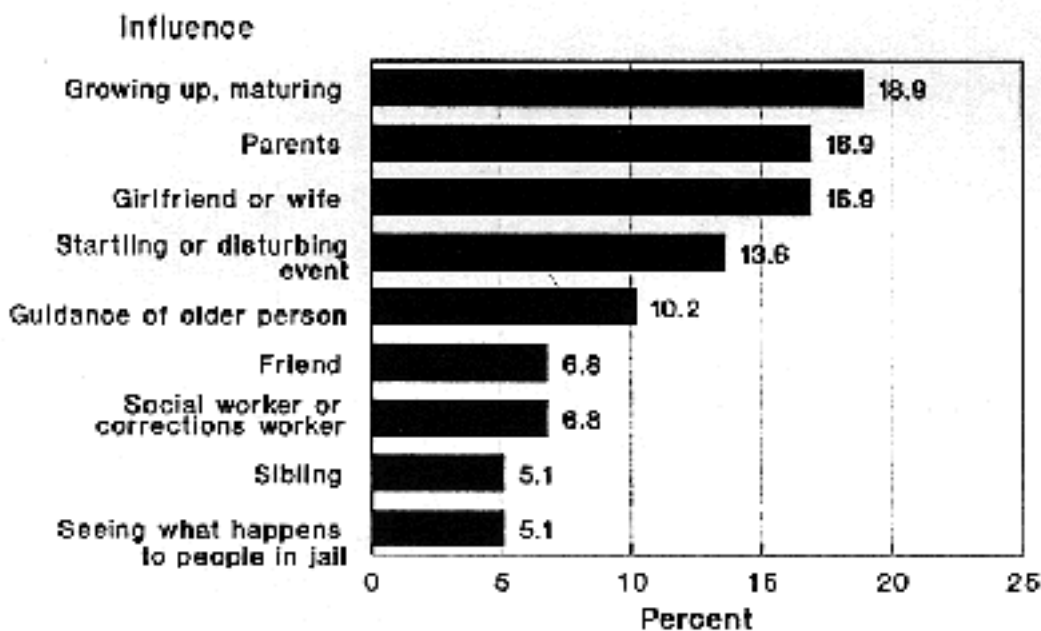
Table 1

Important Influences on Desistence	
Ranked as Most Important	
Girlfriend or wife	35%
Growing up, becoming more mature	25%
Parents	10%
Social worker or person in corrections	10%
Other	20%
Ranked as Second Most Important	
Parents	30%
Growing up, becoming more mature	20%
Girlfriend or wife	15%
Startling or disturbing event	15%
Other	20%
Ranked as Third Most Important	

Startling or disturbing event	25%
Older person who guided, advised	20%
Seeing what jail did to people	15%
Parents	10%
Friend	10%
Growing up, becoming more mature	10%
Other	10%

Figure 2

**Figure 2
Summary of Important Influences
on Desistence**



Personal maturation was the greatest influence overall, followed by parents and wives or girlfriends. It is interesting to note that social workers, corrections staff and the impact of jail received low ratings as influences.

Discussion

The current investigation highlighted some preliminary findings from a retrospective study of former younger offenders.

The lack of research on those individuals who do turn around and the perceived difficulty in collecting a sample were barriers to carrying out this project. However, it has proven feasible to collect data from former young offenders. Many subjects in this study volunteered so that their experiences might help others. For the majority, it was the first time they had told their story in detail to anyone.

The age of desistance varied. The majority were last convicted on or before their 21st year. However for

some, desistence occurred later in their twenties or in their early thirties. It seems that there is a developmental process to desistence which does not necessarily coincide with chronological age limits imposed by legislation. It is clear that criminal activity in the early adult years does not necessarily lead to an adult criminal career.

In most cases, the subjects were heavy users of drugs and alcohol during adolescence. As with their delinquent activity, their turnaround and the process of desistence were connected with the process of gaining control over drug involvement. Their criminal involvement served to finance their drug habit and related activities. The almost complete lack of use of drugs and alcohol as adults suggests a dramatic change in lifestyle.

While most subjects had intact families at the age of 14, these families were not devoid of problems - 55% had alcohol-related problems.

The affection and support given to the individual were at least as important as the family's situation, yet only 2 of the 20 men reported spending time or talking with their father. While mothers fared better than fathers, the daily relating patterns between the subjects and their families were poor. There did not appear to be a high degree of attachment among family members. Given the degree of criminality shown by the subjects as adolescents, this is not surprising.(4)

It is interesting to note that parents are high on the list of important influences on desistence, although often an indirect influence. The desire to prove oneself or make good as an adult seemed to persist in spite of the many problems that these men inevitably had to face. Perhaps many of these parents never withdrew their support.

The men reported that their personal growth and maturity were important influences in their decision to desist from criminal activity. The difficulty of desisting was highlighted by their low estimates following probation of the likelihood of avoiding trouble with the law. Yet they came to develop long-term goals and a positive outlook.

It seems that other individuals played a large part in affirming the process of desistence. Most notably girlfriends or wives seemed to have an important role to play. This role might, however, have been filled by a friend.

Of note is the low level of influence accorded to corrections workers, social workers and parole officers. The subjects who did mention staff indicated that they went beyond their traditional job description and offered friendship and guidance.

According to these desisters, increased maturity and the influence of another individual are important to the desistence process. As with many social problems, we are left with a causal dilemma. Does maturity emerge from the influence of another or vice versa? Or, are these both symptoms of some third process? The varying age at which desistence seems to have occurred raises other questions. To what extent are there individual differences in susceptibility to intervention?

In conclusion, the study highlights a diversity of pathways which lead to desistence. This diversity

indicates the necessity for a receiver oriented paradigm for service providers and policy makers. Fixed therapeutic programs for all individuals and all ages appear not to be the answer.

(1)G.B. Trasler, "Delinquency, Recidivism and Desistence," *British Journal of Criminology*, 19(1979): 314-322.

(2)E. Mulvey and J.F. LaRosa, "Delinquency Cessation and Adolescent Development," *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 56(1986): 214.

(3)Copies of the interview schedule can be obtained from Paul Hubert, Department of Psychology, University of Guelph, Guelph, Ontario N1G 2W1.

(4)M. LeBlanc and M. Fréchette, *Male Criminal Activity from Childhood through Youth: Multilevel and Developmental Perspectives* (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1989).