

Got Assistance? Profit-Driven Criminal Careers and Assisted Desistance

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Abstract

Research on assisted desistance has not considered the influence of criminal-involvement factors on the receptivity to assistance. Although most crimes committed are motivated by the prospect of gain, current knowledge on desistance from lucrative offending is still rudimentary. The purpose of this study was to examine the assistance in the desistance process of 27 individuals having committed profit-driven crimes. First, based on life story narratives, the acknowledgment of assistance was explored. Then, how and when this assistance arose in participants' lives was studied. Results demonstrate the value of the assisted desistance framework in understanding desistance. Other findings include the fact that assistance may take many forms and may arise at various phases in the process of desistance.

Keywords

criminal career, desistance, assisted desistance, profit-driven crime, life story narratives

Recent research on desistance from crime generally agrees that this process results from both agential (modification of the narrative script and changes in identity) and structural (modification of social relations and taking advantage

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of opportunities for a change) changes. In fact, desistance can be seen as the result of a situational context in which multiple factors converge to create a dynamic favoring commitment and change (Lloyd & Serin, 2012).

A better understanding of the factors and circumstances that lead individuals to desist could support the development of reliable intervention strategies that case workers could rely on to motivate and assist individuals who have offended (Rex, 1999). Increasingly, studies are demonstrating the positive effect of judicial intervention such as probation on the desistance process (King, 2013; Ugelvik, 2021; Villeneuve et al., 2021). Thus, research on assisted desistance favors the development of practical support strategies that can help individuals who have offended reintegrate into society.

Most of the research on assisted desistance has focused on interventions carried out in correctional contexts or in the period following contact with authorities. Many studies have examined the practices and the roles of formal and informal assistance in these contexts (Bourgon & Guterrez, 2013). However, little is known about other forms of assistance or assisted desistance in other contexts (i.e., outside of legal procedures). Therefore, this study explored the role of assistance in the desistance process, using data on the subjective experiences of individuals whose offending primarily took the form of lucrative criminality. Life story narratives were used to reconstruct the trajectories of individuals recruited from the community, to determine the presence of assistance in these individuals' self-narratives, and identify, when possible, the timing and form of assistance.

Lucrative Criminality

Blumstein et al. (1988) define criminal career as a longitudinal sequence during which an individual commits crimes. There is a clear interest in understanding the criminal careers of individuals who have committed lucrative crimes, as the majority of all crimes are motivated by the prospect of monetary gain (Uggen & Thompson, 2003). Lucrative, economic, and profit-driven crimes comprise a wide range of activities. Some rely on the use of force (e.g., robberies), others on fraud (e.g., phishing), and others again on market activities (e.g., drug trafficking). Some result in victims, while others are consensual transactions between offender and client (Naylor, 2003). Because a criminal career reflects a sequence of interrelated choices, all tending toward the same end (Hochstetler, 2002), it is conceivable that offenders share common motives for committing profit-driven crimes. According to Naylor (2003), lucrative crimes are motivated, at least in part, by financial considerations. Moreover, the expected outcome of a criminal activity explains the choice to cease or continue illegal

activities (Nguyen et al., 2021; Ouellet & Tremblay, 2014). Therefore, it would be relevant to examine how these outcomes could be taken into consideration when developing interventions.

The rational choice perspective provides a conceptual framework for understanding the motivations behind criminal involvement. According to this theory, offenders are seen as actors whose attempt to fulfill an objective is constantly informed by evaluating the advantages and disadvantages of acting out (Becker, 1968). Further, these individuals are seen as rational beings primarily motivated by the quest for profit (Becker, 1968; Ehrlich, 1973; McCarthy, 2002). Naylor (2003) suggests that monetary gain is not the only anticipated outcome of lucrative criminality, and research on criminal success has demonstrated that criminal activity may confer a variety of benefits. These include avoidance of costs—that is, impunity (Kazemian et al., 2007; Ouellet & Bouchard, 2017), self-confidence or perceived success (Brezina & Topalli, 2012; Laferrière & Morselli, 2015; McCarthy & Hagan, 2001), or even status or reputation in the eyes of fellow offenders (Décary-Héту & Dupont, 2013; Tremblay & Morselli, 2000).

Offenders are conscious of the costs and benefits of their crimes, and their decision to stop offending is conscious. It may have several motivations, including weariness with a life of crime, a desire to avoid further problems with the police, and a desire to not disappoint those close to them (Barry, 2013). Vidal et al. (2020) analyses of the narratives of individuals who committed lucrative crimes reveal that desistance depends on identifying substitutes for criminal outcome, that is, that the expected benefits of crimes shed light on the prerequisites for sustained desistance. Accordingly, identifying outcomes that stimulate desistance may advance the development of social-reintegration strategies and, by extension, desistance-oriented ones.

Assisted Desistance

There is an emerging consensus that desistance from crime is a gradual process of cessation of, and long-term abstinence from, offending behaviors (Bushway et al., 2001; Kazemian, 2016, 2021; Maruna, 2001). Maruna et al. (2004) suggest that desistance is a two-stage process consisting of primary desistance, which corresponds to cessation (even if only temporary) of criminal behaviors, and secondary desistance, which consists of the sustained abstinence from criminal activity and requires a change in identity. McNeill (2016) adds a third stage—tertiary desistance, which is a modification in one's sense of belonging to a moral and political community (p. 201).

Several studies have examined the etiology of desistance. Although this question is complex, there is an emerging consensus around the idea that

desistance is a multifactorial phenomenon (Kazemian, 2016) and that it is likely to result from a combination of agential and structural factors (Farrall & Bowling, 1999; Vaughan, 2007; Weaver, 2019). The latter are diverse and include, among others, situational contexts (Bottoms et al., 2004), social contexts (e.g., social bonds and social roles; F.-Dufour et al., 2015; Laub et al., 1998; Laub & Sampson, 2003; Sampson & Laub, 2003b), and macro-level influences (e.g., institutional practices) (Farrall et al., 2014). Moreover, structures can enable or constrain desistance by providing a more or less favorable environment for change (Bottoms et al., 2004). As such, the assisted desistance framework can be understood as a perspective on some structural elements that favor the cessation of criminal activity.

F.-Dufour et al. (2018) defined assisted desistance as any assistance provided to an offender that aims directly or not to maintain desistance from crime. King (2013) was the first to use the term “assisted desistance” in a study of the impact of probation. This concept was used to denote the factors that support individuals in their desistance process, such as various judicial interventions. Several studies have concluded that the actions of probation officers can have a positive impact on desistance (Burnett & McNeill, 2005; Farrall, 2016; Healy, 2012; McCulloch, 2005; Rex, 1999). Assistance provided by probation officers favors motivation, personal development, and self-confidence, all of which are prerequisites for desistance (King, 2013). Key elements of helpful interventions are establishing a trusting relationship and the continuity and consistency of assistance (Barry, 2007, 2013). Formal interventions, such as probation, however, have a limited scope. Most studies report mixed results, with a significant fraction of participants not reporting probation in a positive light. Farrall (2016) suggests that such negative results may reflect a late onset of the interventions’ effects. However, study conducted in Canada has demonstrated that the receptivity to assistance among individuals receiving conditional sentences was different in the three pathways to desistance identified (F.-Dufour, 2015).

Assistance offered by professionals (correctional officers, probation officers, and correctional advisors) responsible for ensuring the social integration of individuals who are, typically, under some form of constraint (e.g., inmates and probationers) is defined as formal assistance (Villeneuve et al., 2021). On the other hand, informal assistance is offered by community workers (often volunteers) who work with individuals who are typically voluntary participants (F.-Dufour et al., 2018). According to Cheliotis et al. (2014), informal assistance is more flexible and may be better suited to the promotion of the personal reform underlying desistance. These interventions can favor the development of a new identity and modify the offender’s perception of themselves and others, both of which support desistance (F.-Dufour et al., 2018).

However, it is unknown whether the effects of these forms of assistance are long-lasting (F.-Dufour et al., 2018).

Research has also shown that social support is crucial to desistance (Chouhy et al., 2020; Cid & Martí, 2017; Copp et al., 2020; Weaver & McNeill, 2015). Some authors believe that because identity is socially constructed and negotiated, the success of desistance depends on the individual's perception of themselves and their perception by others (Braithwaite, 1989; Maruna et al., 2009). McNeill (2016) points out that the desister's new identity must be recognized both informally (by social relations) and formally (by laws and the State). However, little is known about assistance supporting desistance outside of structured interventions, and this is particularly true of the role of social networks in assisted desistance.

Current knowledge about desistance from lucrative criminality is scarce but suggests that multiple factors (individual, contextual, and social) are involved in the process leading to the cessation of offending. Recent research has demonstrated the existence of multiple pathways to desistance and that the initiation and maintenance of desistance are modulated by multiple factors, including the characteristics of the individual's criminal career and the degree of criminal success (Vidal et al., 2020). Nevertheless, no study has investigated the role of assistance in desistance from profit-driven criminality.

Current Study

Since there is no clear, consensus-based, definition of assisted desistance, studies have relied on broad and variable definitions of the concept (F.-Dufour et al., 2018). Research to date has concentrated on the effect of assistance in particular contexts and has not considered the characteristics of criminal career. Dubois and Ouellet (2020) demonstrated that the challenges of social reintegration vary as a function of the type of offending. For example, individuals having committed sexual offenses face different obstacles than those having committed other types of offences. It is thus plausible that the needs and the types of assistance or interventions also differ as a function of the offence or extent of criminal activity. The current study examined the role of assisted desistance in the pathways of individuals whose offending was primarily lucrative. Self-narratives were used to analyze the recognition of assistance in the desistance process and investigate the forms and timing of assisted desistance.

Data and Methods

This article presents secondary analysis of data collected in the context of another research project, whose objective was to reconstruct the life story

narratives of individuals who had pursued a career of profit-driven criminality, in order to better understand the long-term maintenance of desistance. More specifically, the objectives of that project were to understand the meaning and characterize the process of desistance from crime and examine the influence of criminal career on the desistance and re-entry processes. Particular attention was directed to the effect of criminal success on desistance. Assisted desistance was thus not a central focus of that research—complementary questions related to interventions and assistance were asked as follow-up questions during interviews, but this was not systematic.

Participants

Between 2015 and 2017, 27 individuals of the province of Quebec (Canada) who had desisted from crime were interviewed and asked to “tell their story.” The semi-directed interview lasted approximately 2 hours and included a short questionnaire on criminal career. Participants had to satisfy three selection criteria. First, they had to have ceased criminal activity at least 1 year prior to their participation in the study (this criterion is similar to the one used in the study of Maruna, 2001). Second, their criminal career must have been sustained and regular, which was defined as being criminally active on a monthly basis for at least 2 years. Third, the majority of the crimes committed during their criminal career had to be profit-driven crimes (e.g., robbery, drug trafficking, and fraud).

Several recruitment strategies were used. Some participants responded to postings on social media ($n=11$). Other participants were recruited by partners of the School of Criminology, Université de Montréal ($n=9$), namely social workers and former students. Finally, participants were also recruited from referrals by already recruited participants ($n=7$), using a snowball sampling technique.

Instruments and Procedures

Prior to the interviews, detailed information on participants' complete criminal career and life circumstances was collected, using a short questionnaire based on the life-history calendar method. Life-history calendars are used to describe individual pathways and outline the trajectories that form them. This method improves data quality, by helping participants visually and mentally synchronize several types of events (Freedman et al., 1988). The instrument developed for this project provided participants with landmarks that helped them organize and structure their story. The instrument comprised multiple themes and collected year-by-year information on the various trajectories

composing participants' pathways. The mean time to complete the questionnaire was 30 minutes. The data from the life-history calendars was primarily used for descriptive purposes.

The analysis of life story narratives is a qualitative method that reconstructs the subjective experience of a participant around an identity narrative (Josselson & Lieblich, 1993; Maruna, 2001; McAdams, 1985). The data collected by this method is related to the narrative's meaning to the participant, not its absolute truth (Maruna, 2001). Participants' narratives provide a retrospective view of their life and of the meaning they invest past events with. The participants were told at the beginning of the interview "During this interview; I'd like to discuss the following themes: your life story, your criminal career, your criminal success, your desistance process, the maintenance of desistance, and changes that have occurred in your life. Keeping these things in mind, could you tell me about your life up until when you stopped your criminal activities?" An analytical checklist collected information on the following primary and secondary themes: general life trajectory, criminal career, criminal success, desistance from crime, maintenance of desistance, and identity-related changes (if mentioned during the interview).

Characteristics of Participants

The majority of participants were male and Canadian (92.6%), and the mean age was 38.4 years. All were French-speaking. Most participants were single at the time of the interview (70.4%). Concerning educational achievement, 25.9% had not completed high school, 14.8% had a high school diploma, 37% had a college-level academic or vocational diploma, and 22.2% had a university degree. Almost 60% had been single and unemployed for more than half of their life.

On average, participants had started their criminal activities shortly after their 18th birthday (Table 1). The mean duration of participants' criminal career was 16 years. Over this period, they had committed an average of 2.5 types of crimes, although a significant proportion of participants (29.6%) had specialized in one type of criminal activity. The most common forms of criminal activity were drug trafficking (85.2%), theft (40%), breaking and entering (29.6%), armed robbery (25.9%), and fraud (22.2%).

Analysis of participants' life-history calendars revealed considerable financial benefits from criminal activities: the mean lifetime income from criminal activities was more than one million dollars (\$1,532,908.33). Given the length of their criminal careers, this is equivalent to a mean annual income of \$126,422.87. With regard to prior experience with the criminal justice system, all but one participant had been arrested at least once (range:

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of the Characteristics of the Criminal Career (c.c.) of the Participants.

ID #	Offending onset (years-old)	Age at last crime (years-old)	Length c.c. (years)	Nature of the crimes committed	Number of arrests	Incarceration	Length of incarceration	Criminal earnings c.c.
1	7	46	39	Robbery, burglary, vehicle theft, and drug trafficking	1	No	—	Missing value
2	18	23	5	Theft	0	No	—	\$2,400,000.00
3	14	28	14	Robbery, burglary, theft, fraud, and drug trafficking	8	Yes	9 years	\$2,700,000.00
4	16	30	14	Fraud and drug trafficking	2	Yes	2 years	\$600,000.00
5	11	51	40	Robbery, theft, and drug trafficking	7	Yes	25 years	\$500,000.00
6	21	23	2	Burglary and drug trafficking	1	Yes	Less than a year	\$390,000.00
7	28	34	6	Drug trafficking	4	Yes	4 years	\$676,000.00
8	16	20	4	Burglary, theft, and drug trafficking	1	No	—	\$62,400.00
9	18	29	11	Burglary, drug trafficking, and identity theft	5	Yes	4 years	\$480,000.00
10	19	29	10	Theft and drug trafficking	8	Yes	Less than a year	\$970,700.00
11	16	31	15	Theft and drug trafficking	3	Yes	4 years	\$720,000.00
12	20	29	9	Drug trafficking	2	Yes	5 years	\$1,363,200.00
13	16	35	19	Burglary, vehicle theft, and drug trafficking	7	Yes	11 years	\$1,056,000.00

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

ID #	Offending onset (years-old)	Age at last crime (years-old)	Length c.c. (years)	Nature of the crimes committed	Number of arrests	Incarceration	Length of incarceration	Criminal earnings c.c.
14	14	31	17	Robbery	7	Yes	14 years	\$300,000.00
15	29	49	20	Fence	3	Yes	11 years	\$1,400,000.00
16	18	45	27	Theft and drug trafficking	15	Yes	23 years	\$576,000.00
17	17	23	6	Drug trafficking and sex market	1	No	—	\$686,000.00
18	16	23	7	Theft and drug trafficking	3	Yes	Less than a year	\$257,200.00
19	16	20	4	Drug trafficking	1	No	—	\$108,000.00
20	35	50	15	Drug trafficking	3	Yes	Less than a year	\$8,400,000.00
21	15	31	16	Drug trafficking	5	Yes	3 years	\$1,574,400.00
22	13	39	26	Robbery, burglary, vehicle theft, theft, fraud, and drug trafficking	25	Yes	23 years	Missing value
23	18	51	33	Theft, fraud, and drug trafficking	3	Yes	4 years	\$2,419,200.00
24	15	51	36	Robbery and burglary	3	Yes	31 years	\$258,970.00
25	28	50	22	Theft and drug trafficking	2	No	—	\$411,840.00
26	17	43	26	Robbery, drug trafficking, and sex market	25	Yes	6 years	\$2,140,800.00
27	12	25	13	Fraud, drug trafficking, and fence	3	Yes	Less than a year	\$7,872,000.00

1–25). The majority (77.7%) of participants had been incarcerated, and the number of years of incarceration varied from 1 to 31 years.

Analytical Strategy

A thematic analysis of the transcripts of life story narratives was carried out to code interesting features of the data relevant to the study objectives (Clarke & Braun, 2014). Initially, the interviews were analyzed individually to detect the presence or absence of assistance-related themes in each participant's desistance pathway. This vertical analysis was complemented by a horizontal analysis of the links between the experiences of all the participants. Then, data were reduced and reorganized through an iterative process: drawing on the literature while retaining an openness to new elements, the grouping of codes has made it possible to extract classes of assistance (Roulston, 2014). To optimize the analysis and reduce bias, the authors independently analyzed a subset of the transcripts, and then compared and refined the themes through consensus. Almost half the transcripts ($n = 12$) were used for this evaluation of inter-rater validity.

Results

The results of this study are presented below in a sequence that reflects the analytical approach: the recognition of assisted desistance in participants' discourses, followed by the organization of assistance in the desistance process.

Recognition of Assistance

The observation of assistance in the desistance paths depends on the conceptual definition used. A flexible definition was used in this study: assistance was considered to have been present when a participant stated, in their life story narrative, that they had received support or help in their desistance process. This assistance could have been present at any point in the process but must have been considered to have had a significant effect on the desistance process and lifestyle. The original study did not directly examine the question of assisted desistance, but all participants tackled this theme at one point or another in the interviews.

Most of the participants (70.4%) stated that they had received assistance while desisting. Slightly less than one third (29.6%) stated that they had not received assistance or that assistance had not been a significant factor in their desistance; these participants considered themselves solely responsible, by virtue of a personal decision, for their adoption of a prosocial lifestyle. When

asked about the role significant others or key figures in their lives had had on their desistance, many participants stated that they had achieved this process on their own. The determination to take themselves in hand and succeed on their own was initiated by decisive life events (e.g., substance-abuse relapse and victimization of someone close to them) or by their confidence in their own ability to turn things around and desist from crime. The following two extracts illustrate this.

Participant 1 (3 years crime-free)

After things went bad in Beauce, I told myself that that was it. So I went over to Jo's place and dried out on my own. That time there, it wasn't about therapy, no nothing, no pills, I didn't want anything, I didn't want any of it. . . I knew I would suffer, but you know, I was going to get it right.

Participant 14 (7 years crime-free)

When I was inside, I started to read books and learn things, that's where I told myself that when I get out of prison I was going to take a course in construction management, after university, and, etc. So, you know, I had already made choices before. I think that desistance happens when you see the success you could have as a real citizen.

Previous analyses of these data have revealed the existence of a close link between the characteristics of criminal career, the degree of criminal success, and desistance (blinded for evaluation). Therefore, it is likely that offenders who received assistance may be different from their counterparts who did not. For example, individuals who sought or received assistance could be more invested in a criminal lifestyle and have experienced a more complex desistance process. Conversely, assistance may be less crucial to individuals who experienced a high level of success in their criminal activities (e.g., few contacts with authorities and higher criminal earnings), as their greater human capital and generic skills could facilitate the transition to a crime-free lifestyle. Data gleaned from the life-history calendars can shed light on these hypotheses and could allow identification of differences in criminal career and criminal success in these two groups of individuals (Figure 1). Bivariate analyses revealed no significant differences, although it should be noted that the sample was small. These results suggested that more in-depth investigations of the participants' life story narratives could shed light on the motivations to seek assistance and the forms that assistance could take in the desistance process.

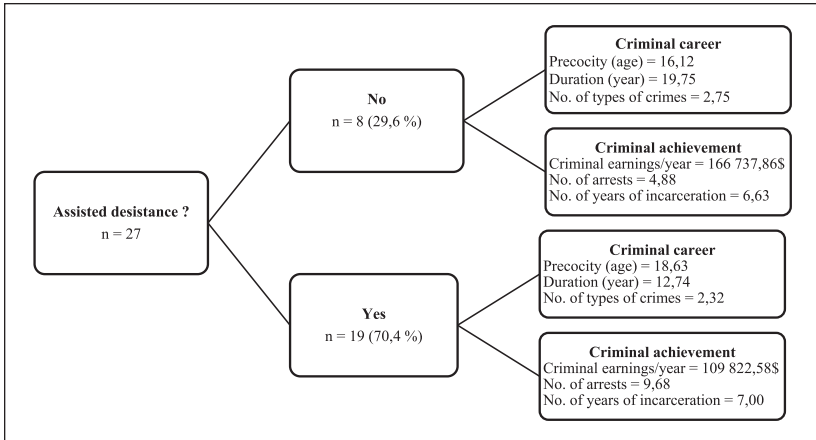


Figure 1. Prevalence of assisted desistance, descriptive statistics of the criminal career, and of the criminal achievement.

Forms of Assistance

The many forms that assistance takes during desistance were analyzed. As seen in Figure 2, three forms of assistance were identified. The first two match the formal and informal assistance described by F.-Dufour et al. (2018). Another category of informal assistance was created to account for some forms of assistance that appeared inconsistent with F.-Dufour et al.'s (2018). This last form of assistance gathers the other sources of assistance that are informal but unstructured. It was possible to identify the mechanisms by which each of the three forms of assistance contributed to the initiation or maintenance of desistance. These mechanisms may be active or passive. A factor was considered to be actively assisting desistance when it involved an interaction between a structural factor and the individual (e.g., interacting with a probation officer). Otherwise, structural factors passively assisted desistance by creating favorable conditions for change (e.g., an opportunity for self-reflection in prison). A given form of assistance could act through different mechanisms in different individuals. For example, a mother could actively support a participant's change process by her actions and encouragement (active mechanisms). However, her mere presence (a passive mechanism) could also affect the decision to cease criminal activity.

The first form is formal assistance, which comprises all the interventions by workers in the correctional service (probation agents, correctional counselors, correctional services officer) (F.-Dufour et al., 2018)—that is,

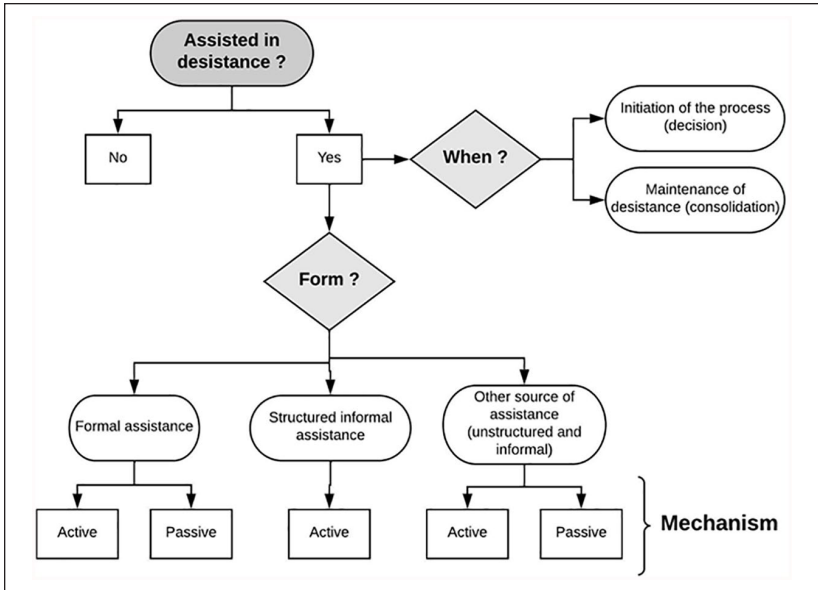


Figure 2. Conceptualization of the forms and mechanisms of assistance.

individuals with a legal responsibility toward their clients. Some participants mentioned benefiting from this form of assistance in their desistance process. For example, one mentioned the active support offered by a halfway house and a probation officer.

Participant 6 (2 years crime-free)

And a halfway house, that works too. . . Because in there, you can get all the resources you need: there's a probation officer, there's psychologists, there's everything. And them, they have contacts with all the community resources. So, if you're looking for a job, they have all the contacts with employment agencies. . . . And in halfway houses, don't worry, they won't drop you. They'll be there to help you succeed. And if you don't succeed, they'll keep you longer if they have to.

Participant 13 (1 year crime-free)

But I was really able to spill my guts with that guy [the probation officer], and that, I say it all the time, that guy never judged me, and we went beyond the program.

In many cases, formal assistance exerted a passive influence on participants' decision to cease criminal activity. Arrest or incarceration was the turning point for nine participants. For some, formal assistance had a rapid effect: judicialization made them realize the risks associated with their lifestyle, and this new cost-benefit analysis caused them to rethink their criminal involvement. For others, rethinking resulted from the incarceration context (e.g., conditions, isolation, and boredom) or the length of their sentence. Sometimes, the mere prospect of a lengthy prison sentence was sufficient motivation to cease criminal activity. These direct punitive experiences reflect Gibbs' (1975) and Nagin's (2013) classic conception of specific deterrence, namely the effect of legal sanctions on those who suffer them.

Participant 6 (2 years crime-free)

*So it was after that, when you go inside, when you get to your cell at night and they lock your pretty little door, then you say to yourself, do I really want to come back here and live my whole life here? So it was then that I said "Ok, f*** this". That was it for that way of life for me.*

Participant 20 (12 years crime-free)

Inside you've got a curfew and stuff like that. You can't do much of anything inside. In the federal prisons, you have a cell and a TV. There, they lock the doors from 10 until 7, so you know that if you're not a good sleeper, and you get to sleep at midnight or 1, what can you do? It's always the same thing on TV, so you think. So after a while like you say to yourself well if I keep on, the sentences are going to get worse, how old am I going to be, you start to think about everything like that, you know, the children, all those things.

The second form of assistance is informal assistance, structured intervention in which case workers have no legal responsibility for social reintegration (F.-Dufour et al., 2018). As these forms of assistance usually relied on voluntary participation, the mechanisms by which they supported desistance were necessarily active. In particular, they helped participants resolve their substance-abuse problems, which were often associated with their criminal involvement. Eight participants stated that their desistance had been supported by prison programs offered by community organizations, therapy for substance abuse, or community resources. One participant explained how community resources had helped him maintain desistance.

Participant 22 (4 years crime-free)

When things are going bad, when I don't have money, when I'm looking for work and can't find any, and I don't have any money, and I don't have clothes, I have trouble affording a pair of socks, or soap, well then, I fight, and I find alternatives, I go ask for help the community resources, I do other things to fight those thoughts or the temptation to start stealing or the pattern, or the habit of stealing. You know, when I go see the community resources, well they help me with clothes, and then it's ok. I go see another community resource who helps me with hygiene products, they are free.

It appears that the beneficial effects of substance-abuse therapy were sometimes deferred rather than immediate for participants who had participated in multiple therapies of this kind. One participant described the way the therapies had helped her once she had decided to stop consuming:

Participant 10 (6 years crime-free)

I even started to rethink things when I was at my mom's, when I got there at the beginning and I was hospitalised for my arm, I started to rethink a lot of things. And I looked back on my life, what they talked about in therapy, something I hadn't really done seriously before.

The third and last form of assistance reflects informal and unstructured assistance provided by individuals and institutions (i.e., outside of correctional settings). Most often this was provided by a family member (mother, father, sibling, and cousin), spouse, or friend (including other inmates or therapy co-participants) who offered moral and emotional support (e.g., encouragement and acknowledgment of progress), or financial support. This person sometimes became a source of informal social control by reinforcing a conventional lifestyle. In some cases, those close to the participant offered practical help by supporting them in their re-entry process, particularly the search for employment. In some cases, participants' social networks could not offer this type of assistance. However, one participant found a way to overcome this problem:

Participant 18 (8 years crime-free)

I had to educate my family so that they could provide the right kind of support. I had to put the words and ideas into their heads so that they would know how to treat me, so it was, it was hard work, it was really tough. . . . So now the family supports me better, you know. My mother is clearly doing it. She got the latest update and is doing it right.

Family relations may also act passively on desistance. Participants mentioned that having a family or children was crucial in their decision to desist or maintain desistance. They wanted to avoid disappointing or hurting those close to them.

Participant 12 (1 year crime-free)

Well yeah, of course, when you call your mother at Christmas and she bursts into tears, you can see that you're hurting her. . . her boy's in prison at Christmas. . . You don't want to have to have her go through that again either. . . that's pretty much why I didn't go back in there. The big thing was my family.

Participant 18 (8 years crime-free)

So when I got out of prison, the whole family came to get me. There was my mother, my two brothers. . . So when they came to see me, their faces, especially my mother's. I like promised myself to never see that face again. Like never. So then I understood why like it's not right to take advantage of people because there are people who love you, you know. So then I understood that I already had, I don't know, my team, like my gang, you know.

Other factors exerted a passive effect on desistance. Access to educational programs and the opportunity to get a job that provided legitimate income were identified as key elements supporting desistance. As was the case with family relations, these factors support desistance passively, as they are benefits that participants would lose should they return to criminal activities. Participants maintained their crime-free lifestyle because they now had too much to lose (employment, housing, high-quality family relations).

Timing of Assistance

Analysis reveals that assistance can influence both the initiation and the maintenance of desistance. For some participants ($n=7$), assistance was a factor in both phases. For others, it was a factor for only one of the two phases (initiation: $n=8$; maintenance: $n=4$): for example, some participants stated that their choice to cease criminal activities had been entirely personal and that assistance had helped them remain on the right path but had not been a factor in their choice to desist. In all, assistance influenced the decision to cease criminal activities in 15 cases and supported the maintenance of desistance in 11 cases.

It was not possible to associate specific forms of assistance with specific stages of the desistance process. However, it does appear that informal unstructured assistance, rather than formal and informal structured assistance, was the primary influence on the decision to desist. In fact, except for the passive mechanism of formal assistance, structured interventions (formal or informal) did not support the initiation of the desistance process. Only the specific deterrence associated with passive formal interventions influenced the decision to cease criminal activities. The finding that interventions had a limited effect on the initiation of the process is consistent with theories of desistance that posit that individuals must be minimally open to change if they are to be receptive to assistance toward desistance and able to benefit from these hooks for change (Giordano et al., 2002). In fact, several participants had been part of multiple unsuccessful formal and informal interventions through their path. One participant, who was motivated to benefit from his most recent incarceration, explained that several factors contributed to the transformation in his receptivity to change.

Participant 13 (1 year crime-free)

There's like a burnout that happens at some point. That life was a lot of fun, but it was tiring too. . . there's family, my brother who had children, I missed my sister's wedding, and my brother's. . . I missed the birth of my nephew Alexandre. So you know because of all that I wanted to change, I went to see my parole officer in the Assomption regional centre and I told him that I didn't know which prison he'd send me to, but I'm easy to influence, I like to get high, I like to make money, and I like power tripping, so I didn't know where you're sending me, but I need a change.

In summary, it appears that assisted desistance can take many forms, can act passively or actively, and can intervene at different stages of the desistance process. It is important to note that the assistance that participants considered crucial did not have a systematic or symmetric effect, and that the benefits of the assistance were a function of the individual, the individual's pathway, and the timing of the assistance. For example, while incarceration was dissuasive for some participants, it was criminogenic for others.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of individuals who had been involved in lucrative criminality of the assistance they received during their desistance process. Recognition of assistance was examined

first, followed by an analysis of how this assistance emerged and its timing in their life course. Few empirical studies have studied assisted desistance in the way this study has. Actually, most studies of the cessation of criminal careers have selected their participants based on desistance-related criteria, and have neglected to take into account the nature and intensity of criminal career. However, criminal career characteristics may influence desistance, as they can facilitate or hinder social reintegration (Vidal et al., 2020). The research project on which this study is based used both desistance and criminal career criteria in the selection of participants. Therefore, this is an original sample of offenders, mainly involved in profit-driven crime. Because participants were individuals whose primary form of offending had been lucrative criminality, they tended to have similar criminal goals. These goals shed light on the process of desistance. Second, the participants were recruited outside of the correctional environment, which allowed for a broader and more nuanced vision of assistance associated with legal sanctions. Moreover, this recruitment strategy allowed some methodological issues—for example, accounting for the long-term effect of programs (Farrall, 2016)—to be overcome. Third, because data collection was not initially focused on assisted desistance, it was possible to analyze the prevalence of the recognition of assistance and the role of assistance in the desistance process. Fourth, the flexibility of this study's definition of assisted desistance facilitated the identification of various forms of assistance.

The aforementioned features of this study demonstrate the value of studying the role of assisted desistance in the process that leads to the cessation of criminal activities and help contextualize the results obtained. The majority of life stories analyzed recognized the crucial role of the assisted desistance framework. As lucrative crime accounts for the majority of crimes in our societies, and only a small fraction of “chronic” offenders are responsible for 50% to 70% of crimes (e.g., Blumstein et al., 1988; Moffitt et al., 2002; Piquero, 2000; Wikström, 1985), there is clear value in understanding the mechanisms responsible for these individuals abandoning their lives of crime. The analyses presented here contribute to this understanding by showing that assistance can take many forms (formal assistance, structured informal assistance, and unstructured informal assistance), that assistance can be either active or passive, and that assistance may intervene at various phases in the desistance process (initiation or maintenance). Moreover, it appears that these forms, mechanisms, and timing of assistance can be combined and juxtaposed within individual pathways.

It was found that formal assistance may help individuals desist from crime; this has been reported elsewhere (Burnett & McNeill, 2005; Farrall, 2016; Farrall et al., 2014; King, 2013; McCulloch, 2005; Rex, 1999), although

not invariably (F.-Dufour, 2015). Informal assistance, which targets specific needs, helped many participants resolve their substance-abuse problems. Long-term effect of assistance was observed with some participants in this study, echoing Farrall's (2016) findings with probation. This result, together with the observation that structured assistance (either formal or informal) appeared to have little effect on the initiation of desistance, compared to unstructured assistance, implies that openness to change is necessary for assistance to be effective. The fact that informal social-control institutions (e.g., employment) and members of the participants' entourages exerted a much more significant influence on the decision to desist suggests that interventions in populations less receptive to change should recruit these actors in order to enhance motivation for change. In his recommendations for desistance-related interventions, McNeill (2009) discusses the importance of integrating the development of social capital into probation follow-up. There is a clear need for such resources outside of probation or the criminal justice system. These informal social control institutions are likely to increase desistance without formal assistance and decrease reliance on the criminal justice system. Thereby, national and local governments should invest, create, and support these institutions.

It thus appears that assisted desistance can be better understood through theories that posit interactions between individuals and their social environment. According to the theory of cognitive transformation, desistance results from an interaction between a transformation of the individual's openness to change and the exposition to a hook for change (Giordano, 2016; Giordano et al., 2002). The results of this study align with this idea, as formal, informal, or other forms of assistance corresponded to such opportunities for support in the changes that lead to desistance from crime.

Previous studies of assisted desistance mention the importance of prior evaluation of participants, a prerequisite for developing a personalized intervention strategy adapted to the needs of the individual who has offended. McNeill (2003) discusses the need for case workers to review participants' life history, social network, motivations, and perceptions of change. In practice—as the results reported here illustrate—the realities surrounding change toward desistance are even more complex and do not necessarily include direct intervention by individuals or institutions. Therefore, effective intervention requires understanding the factors favoring receptivity to change and assistance (regardless of form or mechanism of action) in these individuals.

The data used in this study illustrate the multiplicity of the forms of desistance. For example, some individuals are dissuaded by their first arrest, while others are only dissuaded after multiple incarcerations. Similarly, the assistance received in multiple therapy sessions or programs has a deferred effect

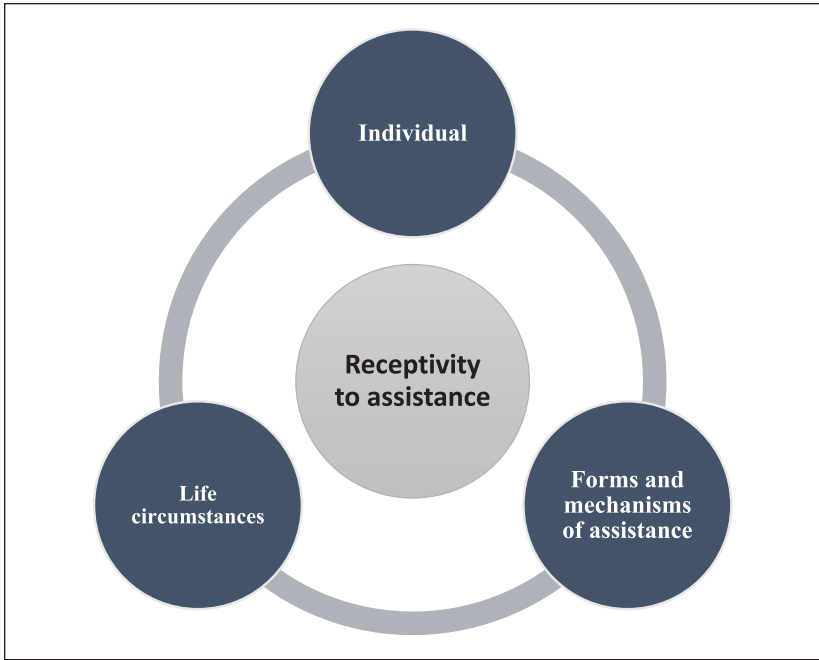


Figure 3. The dynamic nature of receptivity to assistance.

in some individuals but an immediate one in others. The results demonstrate the dynamic nature of receptivity to assistance, which requires the convergence and interaction of multiple elements: individual open to change, favorable life circumstances, and forms of assistance and mechanisms of action suited to the individual (Figure 3).

This triangulation of elements starts with the individual. Receptivity to assistance thus depends on the individual, their life history (McNeill, 2003), as well as on the details of their criminal career and, especially, the goals of their criminal activities. For many of the participants in this study, desistance depended on finding a source of gratification other than criminal activities (for concrete examples, see Ouellet et al., 2020; Vidal et al., 2020). Thus, individuals are more receptive to assistance that provides them with other ways to achieve the same goals (e.g., employment that satisfies financial needs).

Life circumstances also influence the receptivity to assistance. Several empirical studies have demonstrated the impact of life circumstances on transitions within criminal trajectories, some of which were undertaken to shed light on primary desistance (Metcalf et al., 2019; Ouellet, 2019). The results

of this study show that life circumstances (e.g., fatigue with a criminal lifestyle and viewing prison assistance programs as occupations) condition receptivity to assistance by offering an enabling context. The turning points identified in the life story narratives also help explain why receptivity to assistance increases at specific moments (e.g., an arrest may unmask a criminal lifestyle to the individual's family and friends). Thus, transitions and turning points, two key concepts in the life-course perspective, are essential to understand receptivity to assistance. These results echo empirical work adopting the life-course perspective and show that the turning points are implicated in the desistance process (Laub & Sampson, 2001; Sampson & Laub, 2003a). They are necessary for understanding the processes behind any change (Laub et al., 1998). They also highlight the interactive nature of human agency and life events (Laub & Sampson, 2001).

Finally, the forms and mechanisms of action of assistance described here must be adapted to the needs of specific individuals and implemented in a timely fashion. The triangulation described above echoes Barry's (2013) "desistance by design," which sees desistance as a process involving negotiation by individuals who must make choices and decisions, rather than the simple result of coincidences. These individuals' choices make them the central actors in their desistance: conscious of the benefits of their criminal activity, they nevertheless explicitly agree, for a variety of reasons, to cease this activity (Barry, 2013).

Some limits related to this study's data and analyses must be considered when interpreting the results presented here. The scope of the results is limited by the small number of participants, and the results cannot therefore be generalized. As the larger project this study was a part of was not specifically oriented toward assisted desistance, the data may underestimate the assistance received. Finally, the data analyzed fundamentally depends on participants' recall, and it is reasonable to suppose that the ability to recall the details, circumstances and turning points of a criminal career vary from individual to individual.

In conclusion, this study demonstrated the practical and theoretical value of the concept of assisted desistance. Assisted desistance is a concept that improves our understanding of the dynamics and mechanisms of the stages that mark the cessation of a criminal career and helps orient interventions aimed at social reintegration.

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