Starting Again - Desistance from Crime

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A. BACKGROUND
A cross-sectional age-crime curve

[Recorded offender rates per 1,000 relevant population by age-year and sex, England and Wales, 2000]
A Longitudinal Age-Crime Curve for ‘chronic’ offenders

Cambridge Study of Delinquent Development: age-crime curve for chronic offenders (defined as 4+ convictions)

Longitudinal Age-Crime Trajectories for Different Groups in Laub/Sampson 2003, p. 104

Predicted Rate of Offending

- Classic Desister (19.9%)
- Low Rate Chronic I (24.4%)
- Low Rate Chronic II (8.0%)
- Moderate Rate Chronic (18.4%)
- Moderate Rate Desister (26.1%)
- High Rate Chronic (3.2%)
Early and Late Desistance

‘There is tentative evidence [of] significant differences between early and late desistance. In the early stages, … [would-be desisters’ ] goals are more likely to revolve around finding conventional roles…and “becoming normal”. …In the later stages, people may move on to a deeper set of concerns, including the creation of a different self-identity’

Source: Shapland and Bottoms (2017), p 754 (adapted).
‘The most important [criminal justice] influence on desistance is getting convicted.’

Maturation: Brain Development in Early Adulthood

There is increasing evidence that the pre-frontal cortex of the brain continues to develop in late adolescence and early adulthood. This appears to lead to improvements in executive functioning, especially improved impulse control, and improved planning. (see Johnson et al, 2009)
‘Emerging adulthood is the critical developmental stage during which individuals select life goals based on available resources and opportunities...Life goals are narrowed, eliminated, and refined...Articulating and selecting goals, directing one’s resources to achieve those goals, and evaluating one’s success in meeting identified goals contribute to emerging adult mental health.’

B. THE SHEFFIELD DESISTANCE STUDY, 2003-7
Sheffield Desistance Study: Eligibility Requirements


2. Currently serving *either* a short or medium-term custodial sentence, *or* a community sentence under the supervision of the probation service.

3. Has a minimum of two conviction occasions for ‘standard list’ offences.

4. Had a current address in Sheffield at the time of the last conviction.
## Prior criminality at first interview

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prior to first interview</th>
<th>Conviction occasions Mean</th>
<th>Number of offences Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Convictions for standard list offences</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>17.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cautions for standard list offences</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Convictions for other offences</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cautions for other offences</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of convictions/cautions</td>
<td>10.9</td>
<td>20.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**OGRS:** Mean 77%, Median 83%

Overall, Sheffield sample had 909 conviction occasions for standard list offences by age c.21; compare Cambridge Study, 686 by age 40.
Selected Social Items at Interview 1

**Employment:**
- no job of any kind in last year: 58%
- ‘regular’ job at some time in last year: 24%
  (10% for full year)
- cash in hand/casual jobs only: 18%

**Qualifications and schooling:**
- Excluded from school at some point: 93%
- Excluded permanently or for more than a month: 46%
- Left school without qualifications: 86%
- Obtained qualifications since school: 51%

**Driving:**
- licences held (1 full licence, 5 provisional licences): 5%
**Sheffield Study Reoffending**

A. Reconvictions:

- Between Interviews 1 and 2 63%
- Between Interviews 2 and 3 70%
- Between Interviews 3 and 4 76%
- Any reconviction 80%

B. Frequency of Offences

- Before Interview 1 8.2 standard list offences p.a.†
- After Interview 3 2.6 standard list offences p.a.†

† standardized to account for periods in custody
Patterns of self-reported criminality prior to first and fourth interviews

[Comparison restricted to respondents interviewed at 4 and “at risk” between 3 and 4 (N=71). Data adjusted for time at risk]
# Sheffield Study: Life Goals

At interview 1: What kind of person would you like to be, say in 3 years’ time? (more than one response allowed) (n=110)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Goal</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Going straight/drug and alcohol free</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Live a normal/regular life</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Successful</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be a good person/responsible</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be a family man</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No change</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be rich</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DK/not applicable/other</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: Shapland and Bottoms (2011), p. 262; Bottoms and Shapland (2016)
Examples

- Confident. Hardworking. Trustworthy. Good person to get on with.

- A really good job in computers. I’d get meself a car, a good relationship, a kid, sommat like that. Me own flat...a normal life...and I’d like to be able to say I’ve not touched no drugs for 3 years.
Sheffield Study:
Top six obstacles to going straight or staying straight

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Obstacle</th>
<th>Interview 1 %</th>
<th>Interview 2 %</th>
<th>Interview 3 %</th>
<th>Interview 4 %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lack of money</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunity for easy money</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need for excitement or to relieve boredom</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of work</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having a record</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking drugs</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Bottoms and Shapland (2011), p. 61
Explaining the Final Level of Official Criminality
(Standard List Offences)

Total lifetime official offending \( P = .003 \)
Self-reported obstacles to desistance† \( P = .015 \)
Whether self-identity linked to peers† \( P = .004 \)
Robbery pattern in official offending \( P = .000 \)
\[ \text{[Pseudo } R^2 = 0.44 \] \)

†Measured at Interview 3
A Main Message

For persistent offenders, desistance is largely about learning to lead a non-criminal life when one has been leading a criminal life.
A tentative model of desistance

1. Current offending

2. Wish to try to change

3. Beginning to think about oneself and surroundings differently

4. Taking action towards desistance

5. Attempts maintenance
   - Pre-programmed potential
     (personal, social and criminal history)
   - Social capital
     (bridging and bonding: changes over time)

6. Crime-free identity as non-offender

Triggering event

Relapse

Finds reinforcers

Encounters obstacles
Giordano’s ‘Cognitive Transformation’ Approach

(Influenced by Symbolic Interactionism)

• Stage I: A shift in X’s openness to change.
• Stage II: Exposure to hook(s) for change, e.g. marriage or employment *in interaction with* X’s attitude towards that hook.
• Stage III: Beginning to envisage a ‘replacement self’.
• Stage IV: Transformation in the way X views deviant behaviour.

Sources: Giordano et al (2002), Giordano (2016)
Case history – “Len”: I

First interview: Len, aged 20, was on probation. He had been convicted on eight occasions, and had served one term of 12 months in a Young Offenders’ Institution (YOI). He had been ‘sleeping rough’ (homeless), but, through the intervention of a probation officer, had been found a place in a small hostel near the city centre. He said he felt no shame or regret for his offences, because they were mostly drug-related and ‘when you’re on drugs you don’t care’. But he claimed he wants to stop because he is ‘sick of it’: ‘waking up, trying to find money, trying to find something to eat, stuff like that, day in, day out’.
During the research period, Len was convicted once, for taking a car and drunk driving, with a friend; but he also self-reported several other offences. The conviction acted as a shock. His relationship with his mother had been improving, so he moved back home, to the outskirts of the city. During his time at the hostel, he also met (in a café) a female teacher who then acted as an informal counsellor for him.

By the fourth interview, Len said he was completely off both drugs and alcohol, and he had stopped offending. He usually stayed at home seven nights a week. He considered it important to ‘think first and avoid my old group of friends’. ‘I’m more grown up about things, and take more responsibility for the things I do’.
Diachronic Self-control

Planning daily routines and activities to avoid situations where the person believes they might be tempted to do something that, all things considered, they don’t want to do. [That is, where they fear that they will show what philosophers call ‘weakness of will’ or *akrasia*].

Found frequently among respondents in the Sheffield Study, especially by (i) planning to avoid particular places; (ii) planning not to meet former criminal friends.

*Source*: Bottoms (2013)
C. OTHER DESISTANCE STUDIES
Social Control Through Social Bonds (Laub/Sampson)

• ‘Social Bonds’ effects on recidivism were apparent independently of predictions based on prior experience. (Social Bonds = marriage/employment/military service)
• Concept of “desistance by default”
• Warr’s challenge re delinquent peers

Sources: Sampson and Laub (1993), Laub and Sampson (2003); Warr (2002).
WHAT ABOUT GENDER?

Few studies of desistance among women, but important issues are:

• Romantic partners less helpful to desistance
• Strong significance of caring roles

Sources: Giordano (2016); Leverenz (2014)
DESISTANCE IN DIFFERENT COMMUNITIES

Calverley: Study in England contrasting desistance patterns for Bangladeshi-origin offenders and black-dual-heritage offenders

Sources: Calverley (2013)
References


References cont…


