YOUTH DESISTANCE IN AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND:

WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM HIGHER RISK FORMER OFFENDERS.

Report prepared for the Department of Corrections
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Independent Research Solutions

zavést
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- This report is based on a study of 51 people who were imprisoned at a young age and who were assessed as having a medium to high risk of re-offending, but who nonetheless desisted from crime. The research was commissioned to understand how and why this desistance occurred.
- Despite uniformity of the qualifying factors, there were significant differences between many participants within the research cohort. At each end of this spectrum of difference we identified high- and low-end outliers, and these became important lenses through which to view different desistance processes and challenges.
- Prison was reported to be a deterrent from crime by 81 percent of the cohort.
- Sentence length was not related to deterrence: there were no meaningful differences between longer and shorter sentences.
- Deterrence was influenced by both fear of returning to prison and the boredom associated with imprisonment.
- There was a sense among most participants that they did not 'fit in' with other prisoners. Nonetheless, many reported in hindsight that the prison experience had some positive effects.
- Those who had spent time in both youth and adult units reported that youth units were harder, more frightening and more dangerous places than adult facilities, and that they felt less safe within them.
- In order of likelihood, the decision to desist was made in prison, before prison, and after prison. The decision to desist was most often a conscious and quick one, made at the point of arrest, conviction or imprisonment. For a minority of subjects the decision formed over a longer timeframe and tended not to be overt or conscious. Both types of desistance decision ended in a 'switch' in thinking, meaning a desire to not commit crime in the future.
- One strong deterrent element of imprisonment among some participants was the shame they felt about the embarrassment caused to other family members.

- At the time of the offending, few participants reported considering the victims of their crimes, meaning empathy did not inhibit their criminal behaviour. Post-conviction, however, many began to empathise with their victims and this was a significant trigger of change for many.
- A strong sense of agency was observed among the cohort: the majority took full responsibility for their crimes, and made a conscious choice to change themselves.
- Department of Corrections facilitated programmes and courses provided some participants with skills that supported their desistance, but few credited them with having been decisive influences in their desistance.
- The quality of participants' relationships with probation officers covered a wide spectrum but tended to be good. Positive relationships, however, did not appear to affect desistance. Few participants credited probation with assisting in desistance.
- On average, the cohort's drug and alcohol use was much higher than that of a similar general demographic in the lead up to, and during, their criminal behaviour.
- Between offending and point of interview, there was a significant decrease in the use of drugs and alcohol, but it nevertheless remained high.
- While many participants consciously reduced their alcohol and/or drug intake as a part of the desistance process, many more seemed to mature out of heavier use in a way that was unrelated to desistance.
- Almost the entire cohort reported that they had support from family and friends during the immediate release period. The majority lived with family during this period, and this practical support was overwhelmingly seen as critical to maintaining desistance.
- Changing negative peer groups was a vital part of desistance for 61 percent of the cohort. This was particularly so for the overwhelming number of subjects who had criminal associations during their criminal phase. The changes in criminal associations between offending and point of interview were marked. Having post-release support and changing peer groups were among the study's clearest and most important findings.
- Partners, children and employment were all cited by subjects as highly important to supporting desistance but appeared to have little effect on the original decision to desist. Getting a job, finding a partner and having children were more of a consequence than a cause of desistance. When relationships broke down or jobs were lost, desistance continued in almost all cases.
- Half of desisters reported that their change involved some kind of thought about the future – such as who they could be and what they could do without crime – but very few developed plans of any complexity. For most, change was more to do with choosing to move away from what they were, than with moving toward anything specific.
- The life change evident within the cohort since their offending was significant, and while many credited certain elements, such as work, partners, and children to assisting desistance their actual importance can be questioned. These elements do, however, represent the creation of a pro-social lifestyle.

1. INTRODUCTION

This report is drawn from primary research conducted by Independent Research Solutions with the support of Zavést Licensed Investigators. The study was undertaken between March 2014 and June 2014 and targeted people who had been sentenced to a term of imprisonment before the age of 20. These people had been assessed by the Department of Corrections at the time as having a medium to high risk of re-offending, but had not been given a Corrections-administered sentence for at least three years prior to interviewing. It was a nation-wide project.

Young offenders imprisoned under 20 years of age have the highest reconviction rates of all age groups (91%) and also the highest re-imprisonment (65%) rates within 60 months of release (Department of Corrections, 2014). The subjects of this research thus represent a minority cohort of young offenders who have been incarcerated and were assessed as having a high risk of re-offending but who, in fact, appear to have desisted from further offending.

The broad aim of this research is to identify why these offenders have desisted from crime. Its goal is to assist with the formation of sound policy and the implementation of effective correctional practices that will promote greater rates of desistance among young offenders generally.

STRUCTURE OF THE REPORT

This report is written in 12 sections, including this introduction. Each of the substantive sections deals with discrete issues or findings. Where appropriate we have made links between these sections but often their interconnected nature is difficult to portray. The penultimate section of this report, then, is a discussion that seeks to clarify these links and provide a conclusion.

2. METHODOLOGY

In February 2014 the Department of Corrections provided the research team with the names and last known contact details for a large number of people who fit the research criteria; namely they had been imprisoned before the age of 20, had not been given a Corrections-administered sentence for at least three years and were rated as having a medium or high risk of re-offending at the time of their imprisonment. This list was extracted from Corrections' Integrated Offender Management System database. The extract covered offenders whose last recorded sentence ended between 1 January 2000 and 31 December 2009, and the lengths of the apparent non-offending periods of selected offenders ranged between three and 11 years duration. The extract included the offenders' full names, dates of birth, and last known addresses, as well as contact information from publically available sources such as the white pages, the electoral roll and social media. Where possible, those who were deceased or had left the country were excluded from this list. An initial list of 173 participants was provided.

The qualifying 'medium to high risk of re-offending' was established by RoC*RoI scores[1] of at least 0.5, meaning participants were assessed as having a minimum 50 percent chance of reimprisonment within five years. Because members of the potential sample had been out of prison for an extended period (at least three years, but often much longer) it was anticipated that contact details would in many cases be out of date. This proved to be so. The vast majority of qualifying

[1] **RoC*RoI is the 'Risk of re-Conviction X Risk of re-Imprisonment model'** developed by the New Zealand Department of Corrections to generate a numerical score that predicts an offender's chance of re-offending after release (Bakker, O'Malley, & Riley, 1998). The model was developed using the criminal records of more than 133,000 offenders, and is now used to calculate the recidivism risk of every offender managed under sentence by the Department of Corrections in New Zealand. Scoring is calculated with the input of a wide range of data, including demographic characteristics, time spent at large and in prison, number of convictions, and the seriousness of individual offences for which the person has been convicted.

individuals had moved and/or changed phone numbers in the years subsequent to their release. Subsequently the list of potential subjects was expanded to 285[2]. During this time, a number of people originally meeting the criteria had been charged with or convicted of offences for which they were imprisoned. They were not pursued further.

The research team used a number of methods to gain participants' contact details including telephone directories, social media and data bases such as the electoral roll, the habitation index, the personal properties security register, and VEDA. Often contact was made with family or friends of the participant and then traced through to the primary contact.

While this was a time-consuming endeavour, the success rate for participant acceptance was high. More than 85 percent of those directly spoken to agreed to be interviewed, although numerous appointments were broken and had to be rescheduled.

A total of 51 people – 49 men and two women – were interviewed for this project.

Based on prior research, much of which came from a review of literature provided by the Department of Corrections, an interview schedule was designed covering 12 areas: community; family; education; employment; health; drugs and alcohol; crime; associations; prison; desistance; release; and programme and support agencies. These areas of interest were structured into at least one of three sections: pre-prison; prison; and post-prison. The structure in this approach ensured that all topics deemed important, based on the review of literature, were covered while also providing prompts to participants recalling events that may have occurred years previously. Many of the questions were deliberately broad and open ended, however, to allow for unanticipated data and to enhance the richness of the individual narratives.

The semi-structured nature of the approach proved important. Most participants had difficulty reflecting on the significance of their experiences and the framework used allowed for prompting on certain points. Notwithstanding that, the research picked up on a number of issues that were not anticipated, and the conversations stemming from the open questions made this possible.

Unanticipated issues of interest led necessarily to a dynamic approach whereby findings from earlier interviews were incorporated into later interviews to test their frequency and importance. While this approach was highly valuable, it did mean that some data sets are incomplete because the questions were not asked of earlier participants. Where we did not have complete data (i.e. input from all participants) we have not included percentage figures.

A single interviewer, Dr Gilbert, conducted all of the interviews to ensure a uniformity of approach and also to better allow for this reflexivity in method.

Initially, all interviews were conducted face-to-face but telephone interviews were later used when contact difficulties became apparent. Of a total of 51 interviews, 26 were conducted face-to-face and 25 were conducted over the telephone.

Face-to-to-face interviews ranged in length from 43 minutes to two hours, 37 minutes. Telephone interviews ranged in length from 36 minutes to two hours, three minutes.

The significant variance between the lengths of interviews was due to some questions not being relevant to all participants. If a participant did not undertake programmes in prison, for example, questions relating to programmes were irrelevant. This impacted greatly on interview length, particularly among our 'low-end sample outliers' discussed in Section 4.

[2] Sixteen of the final participants were drawn from this extended list.

While the face-to-face interviews tended to be longer than the telephone interviews, there were no apparent differences in the quality of data or depth of personal disclosure. In the two most serious examples of participants engaging in contemporary criminal behaviour, for example, one disclosure was face-to-face; the other was over the telephone.

In relation to historic information, there were some problems arising from incomplete memories of participants, and this sometimes led to gaps in the data. We were also largely reliant on the information given to us by participants and while we tested any obvious inconsistencies, there is an unavoidable chance of some factual inaccuracies and issues with participants' objectivity regarding their own lives, particularly with regard to criminal behaviour.

All interviews were transcribed and coded within NVivo, which was used to analyse the data.

ETHICS

The methodology for this project was reviewed by the Justice Sector Research Review Group (a group comprising senior Government researchers and two external academic members which provides peer ethical review of justice sector research proposals). Via the peer review of Professor Newbold, the fieldwork was undertaken according to the ethical principles outlined by the University of Canterbury. This included providing participants a comprehensive verbal briefing about the research, giving them the opportunity to ask any questions about it, and obtaining recorded consent. Involvement was voluntary, and participants could withdraw at any time. All information was confidential and appropriate methods regarding data access and secure storage were followed. The Department of Corrections was not made aware of the names or details of those who participated in this study (barring that they were included in the list of 285 potential subjects) and has been provided with no information that is not included in this report.

DEFINING TERMS - DESISTANCE

Young offenders can broadly be divided into two categories: 'persisters', whose offending is ongoing and often high-volume, and 'desisters' who engaged with the criminal justice system at least once, but have subsequently ceased further offending. Persisters tend to show significantly more risk factors (McLaren, 1992), whereas desisters start offending later and are often pushed toward crime by the influence of antisocial peer groups (Moffitt, 1993). But there is significant overlap between the two in all but the level of long-term crime that they commit, and these distinctions are applied only in hindsight.

Desistance from crime is generally thought of as a slow process that may involve a gradual decrease in levels and severity of offending. Given the significance of the change required for desistance, slip-ups can be understood in the context of an ongoing process of development, or desistance narrative. Encouraging desistance, from this perspective, may have more to do with assisting the development of a functional non-criminal identity than with simply punishing offending behaviour. It is rare for adult persisters to desist suddenly, but as we will see in Section 6, it does not appear to be unusual among those who desist at a young age.

The cohort of this study is comprised of people who were statistically likely to persist in offending in significant number, yet they have not. This report, then, looks at these young desisters and the factors that influenced and supported their development away from crime. The objective is to establish how best to support this transition among other youth offenders.

3. THE COHORT

The cohort under analysis is made up of 49 males and two females.

The age of participants at the point of interview ranged from 23 to 34 years, with an average age of 28.7 years.

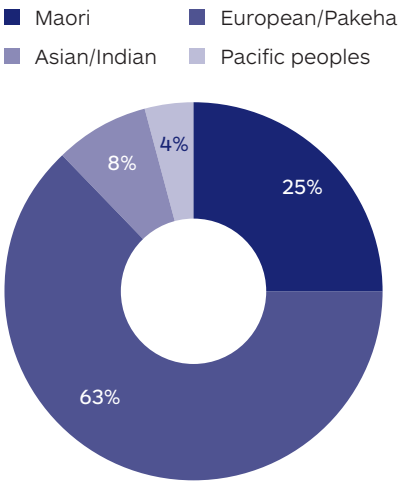
The ethnic makeup is as follows: 63 percent (n=32) identified as European/ Pakeha, 25 percent (n=13) as Maori, 8 percent (n=4) as Asian (including Filipino, Chinese and Indian) and 4 percent (n=2) as Pacific Peoples. This compares to the ethnicity of New Zealand's overall male prison population, which (as of March 2014) comprised 51 percent Maori, 33 percent European/Pakeha, 12 percent Pacific Peoples and 3 percent Asian (Department of Corrections, 2014). Of the total potential sample pool (of 285 people) provided by the Department of Corrections, 45 percent were Maori, 44 percent European/Pakeha, 7 percent Pacific Peoples and 12 percent Other.

Participants were raised in areas from a wide geographic spread throughout New Zealand, from as far north as Whangarei to as far south as Gore, although there was some clustering of participants around Auckland and Christchurch. A full map of these data is available in Appendix B.

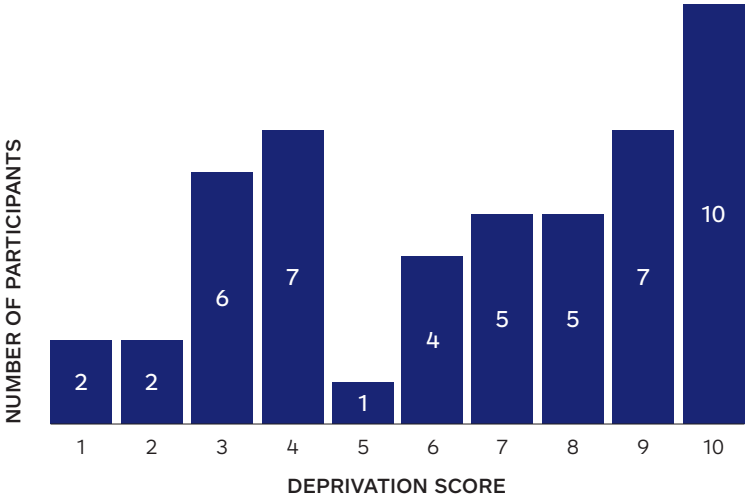
By overlaying the areas in which the participants were raised (as defined by the area that they spent the most time living prior to their offending) with the 2006 Deprivation Index,[3] we can see that our cohort comes from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds: from those whose communities had very low levels of deprivation, to those with very high levels. Deprivation scores provide a measure that is relative to the rest of the country: areas with a score of 10 are within the most deprived ten percent, regardless of the level of deprivation that this actually represents, and the countrywide average

[3] The Deprivation Index combines nine variables from the 2006 census that reflect eight dimensions of deprivation in order to assess the relative deprivation of mesh blocks (small geographic areas) in New Zealand.

PARTICIPANT ETHNICITY



DEPRIVATION SCORE OF PARTICIPANT HOME SUBURB



will always be 5. We can see in the above graph[4] that overall deprivation in our cohort's youth was high, with more than 63 percent (n=31) coming from areas that were below average, including 35 percent (n=17) who came from areas with an index score of nine or ten, indicating extreme deprivation. More than 34 percent (n=17) were less deprived than the average, however, with four participants hailing from some of New Zealand's most privileged communities.

Participants were first imprisoned at ages ranging from 16 to 20, with an average age of 18.1 years. Around half of the cohort (n=25) spent at least some time in a youth facility. Of these, ten were exclusive to such facilities and 15 spent time initially in a youth facility and subsequently time in an adult facility. A further two participants served Corrective Training[5] sentences.

Participants' total combined sentences[6] of incarceration ranged from 14 days to five years, with an average sentence of 19.9 months (607 days). The amount of time served by each participant ranged from five days to 31 months, with an average length of 8.1 months (248 days). Six participants had been sentenced to prison more than once, with four having been sentenced twice and two having been sentenced three times. One further participant had had his sentence extended while he was in prison after a further conviction. On average, our cohort was sentenced to and served more time in prison than those in the potential pool of 285, who were sentenced to an average of 520 days and served an average of 215.

Participants were chosen for this study based on the RoC*RoI scores given to them by the Department of Corrections. Because of this, all of our cohort had relatively high RoC*RoI scores, which ranged from 0.5 to 0.8 with 86 percent being 0.6 or above, indicating that Corrections assessed them (at the time of their incarceration) as being more likely than not to re-offend.

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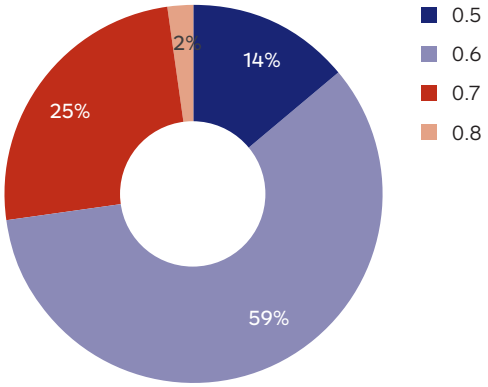
[4] Incomplete data meant that one participant is not included in this deprivation data.

[5] Corrective Training was a three-month 'boot camp' sentence, abolished in the Sentencing Act 2002.

[6] As with Roc*RoI scores, this data was provided to us by the Department of Corrections, after the interviewing process was complete. All other data are reliant upon reporting by participants. .

PARTICIPANT RoC*RoI



The majority of the cohort (n=30) reported that they had left school without any qualifications, while the remaining participants had achieved a high school qualification of some kind. Participants reported leaving school at ages ranging from 13 to 18, with an average age of 15.2.

Slightly less than half (n=24) of the sample reported that members of their family had been engaged in criminal activity prior to their own offending. Of these, the majority (n=15) were extended family members such as cousins or uncles, but over 21 percent (n=11) of the sample reported that close family members, such as parents or siblings, had been involved in crime. In only two cases, however, were these family members the participants' primary caregivers.

No participants reported ever being in 'patched'[7] gangs but 24 had some form of gang association. Five said they were members of 'LA-style'[8] street gangs and two were in skinhead crews. The remainder (n=16) reported informal and mostly very loose engagement with gangs or gang members, although three of these had fathers in a patched gang at some point during their childhood.

A significant majority of the cohort reported complete current desistance from crime. Of the total cohort, two were still offending in a way that may see them return to jail.

A significant majority of the cohort reported complete current desistance from crime. Of the total cohort, two were still offending in a way that may see them return to jail. One said he was growing marijuana and the other admitted to committing occasional burglaries. The former had desisted from his primary offences, which were of a different and more serious nature, while the latter, although reporting that he was strongly motivated to desist, still committed sporadic burglaries in times of hardship. A further seven respondents reported that they had committed some crime after release from prison, but had now desisted fully, except one who reported ongoing petty theft. One participant reported that he was currently charged with a crime unrelated to his prior offending, but otherwise claimed that he had desisted fully. Twenty-one participants also reported that they continue to use illegal drugs (primarily marijuana). For the purposes of this report, we did not treat personal drug use as criminal behaviour.

[7] Patched gangs dominate New Zealand's gang scene and include outlaw motorcycle clubs such as the Hell's Angels and other larger groups such as the Mongrel Mob.

[8] LA-style street gangs tend to be younger and less organised than patched gangs.

4. PREDISPOSING FACTORS

As noted, this research cohort is made up of people with a moderate or high risk of re-offending as judged by the Department of Corrections' RoC*RoI measure. Notwithstanding this, however, differences within the cohort became apparent during the interviews. In an effort to analyse these apparent differences we looked to find quantifiable measures. This section looks at these differences and what they mean to findings discussed in this report and what they may mean to desistance generally.

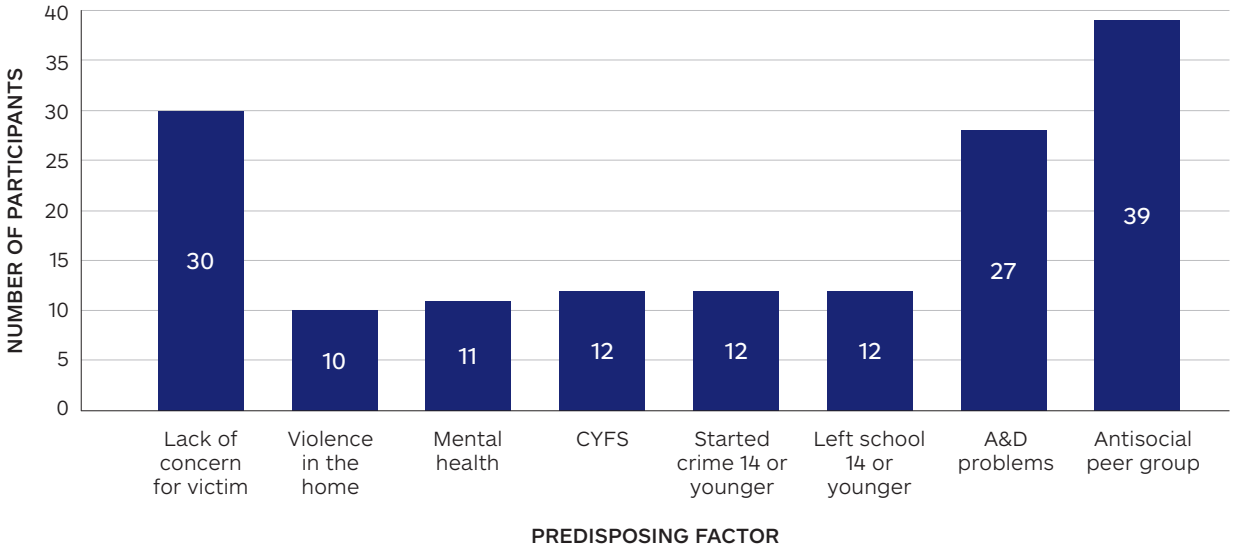
MEASURING DIFFERENCE

Based on existing literature, numerous 'risk factors' – what we will call predisposing factors[9] – have been found to be present among young offenders (Scott 1999; as cited in McLaren, 2000). There is considerable debate, however, around the efficacy of these factors as predictors (Sampson & Laub, 2005), and the practicality of their use (Calley, 2012). Notwithstanding that, we hypothesised that they may tell us something about the desistance process, and as will be shown throughout this report this proved to be correct. Based on existing literature, we identified a number of predisposing factors that are common among persistent offenders. These are:

- Mental health problems
- A history of abuse or neglect, and prior involvement with Child, Youth and Family (CYF)
- Showing little empathy for the victims of their crime

[9] We use the term 'predisposing factors' rather than risk factors to avoid confusion about the fact that this was overall a high-risk group as measured by RoC*RoI.

PREDISPOSING FACTORS



- A history of family dysfunction
- A problem with drug or alcohol use
- Nonattendance at school or having poor school attendance
- Maintaining contact with antisocial or criminal peer groups
- Early commencement of crime, usually before the age of 14

We subsequently made these categories quantifiable (e.g. nonattendance at school we measured as leaving school prior to 14 years of age or younger) in order to assess our cohort.

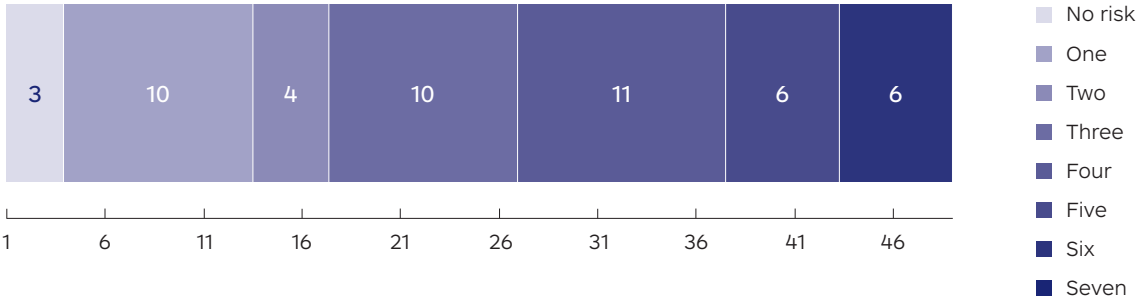
Based on their lives pre-prison, the most frequent predisposing factors identified by participants were maintaining antisocial peer groups at 76 percent (n=39) of the cohort, lack of concern for victims at 59 percent (n=30) and alcohol and drug problems at 53 percent (n=27). The remaining risk factors – violence in the home, mental health problems, intervention by CYF, committing crimes before the age of 14 and leaving school at 14 years of age or younger – all ranged in a narrow band between 24 percent (n=12) and 20 percent (n=10).

Concentrations of these predisposing factors significantly correlated with levels of prior criminality among our participants. Of those who reported committing only a single offence, for example, none were found to possess more than one predisposing factor. Most important for our purposes, however, was the fact that the presence of these predisposing factors explained a great deal about what the desistance process meant for different people. It became clear that those who reported more predisposing factors faced greater hurdles in desisting, both practically and through a lack of cultural capital.

> **...the presence of these predisposing factors explained a great deal about what the desistance process meant for different people.**

Ninety-four percent of the cohort (n=48) had at least one identified predisposing factor as an adolescent. The majority (n=27) of the cohort identified three or

PREDISPOSING FACTORS PER PARTICIPANT



fewer risk factors, and the average number identified across the cohort was 3.3. No participants displayed all eight factors.

While these predisposing factors inform much of the current report, for our purposes it is enough to say that there are significant differences within the cohort. While ostensibly we have observed a cohort of participants with medium to high risk of re-offending, they are far from homogenous. At either end of the spectrum of desistance we have what we have termed 'outliers'.[10]

OUTLIERS

Early in the interview process the differences between certain participants became clear. For some participants the path to prison seemed predestined: their backgrounds, attitudes and behaviours engender a sense of inevitability:

> It pretty much started because we had no food, so I started raiding houses like five blocks down. Probably from age 11. Me and my sister needed to eat - so...

> My dad... he didn't really... I'd get suspended when I was young for fighting and stuff, and my nan would kick my arse and she'd tell my dad and he'd say "oh that's the one boy" and pat me on the back and stuff.

For these participants, desistance often required significant changes in their lives. Others in the cohort, however, reported few if any predisposing factors for offending at all, and the action or activity that landed them in prison was in some way anomalous. In these cases prison was less likely to be rehabilitative than a deterrent to future offending. None of this group saw themselves as criminal, or believed, before their offending, that their community saw them as criminal. Notwithstanding that some may have minimised their offending in hindsight (Murray, 2006), it nonetheless appears that some participants never were criminal in a habitual sense and required few lifestyle changes when they decided to desist:

> Prison was probably a waste of time and a waste of the taxpayer's money for somebody like me.

> I had no problems at school, academically... I was busy with sports, so I didn't really do much. I wasn't really into alcohol and stuff like that. I had a clean record. I got pinged... it was just a one off thing, never been involved with anything else.

> I got in trouble when I was 19 but I was only 15 when I was doing what I was doing. Yeah, so I realised what I was doing was wrong so I stopped doing it but then years later it came out.

[10] These outliers, at either end of the spectrum, evinced moderate correlations with RoC*RoI scores. More than half (n=7) of high-end outliers had high RoC*RoI scores of 0.7, and only one had a score of 0.5. Among our low-end outliers the correlation was less clear. Although none were given a RoC*RoI over 0.6 only three were 0.5.

Given the significant differences between these outliers, we have grouped together those with one or no identifiable predisposing factors (n=13) and called them low-end outliers, and grouped together those with five or more identifiable predisposing factors (n=13) and called them high-end outliers.[11] Where it is pertinent to the analysis, we specifically refer to these groups.

The low-end outliers reported a total of nine predisposing factors between the thirteen of them. Four reported antisocial friendship groups, three reported alcohol or drug problems, and two reported a lack of concern for their victim(s). None reported starting crime before the age of 14 (most reported only a single offence), leaving school before 14, mental health issues, CYF involvement or violence in the home. All achieved a high school qualification of some sort, and four reported that their conviction interrupted their schooling (this was reported by only three of the remaining cohort).

The low-end outliers also reported very short criminal careers, with only one admitting to having committed more than one consequential crime. The overall sentences given to these participants, however, had an average sentence imposed of 681 days whereas the overall average for the cohort was 620. This indicates that although their crimes were isolated incidents, they were not among the less serious.

The thirteen high-end outliers recorded a total of 73 predisposing factors among them, or an average of 5.6. The most common was criminal peers, which was reported by all thirteen, followed by alcohol and/or drug problems, lack of thought given to victims, and starting crime before the age of 14, all of which were reported by eleven of the thirteen participants in this category. Violence in the home was reported by eight, and mental health issues, CYF involvement and leaving school before 14 were all reported by six participants. Only two achieved high school qualifications before prison, and none were in school or employed at the time of their conviction.

> **For some participants the path to prison seemed predestined: their backgrounds, attitudes and behaviours engender a sense of inevitability...**

All but one reported periods of criminal activity that continued for multiple years. These periods ranged from approximately[12] two years (from ages 16 to 18) to twelve years (ages 5 to 17), with an average of five years. Despite this, only two high-end outliers reported having served more than one sentence in prison. These participants did serve significantly longer sentences than the total cohort however, being sentenced to an average of 703 days and serving an average of 330.

One element of potential importance that we are unable to test, however, is the differences that exist between our desisters and those who go on to re-offend. Without a control sample of persisters it is not possible to meaningfully assess the relationship between these factors and recidivism. It is unclear exactly what level of risk the various predisposing factors actually represent. As we will see, the cohort is certainly high in certain problematic elements that can be measured against population data (namely alcohol and drugs as outlined in Section 9). Based on the existing offending

[11] Of note, one of the female participants was a high-end outlier.

[12] These data are based on ages given by participants rather than exact periods (which were generally not accurately recalled) and therefore should be considered indicative only.

literature, however, we hypothesise that our cohort overall would have, based on our measures, fewer predisposing factors and lower frequency of combined factors than those who go on to persistently re-offend.

Hypotheses aside, the RoC*RoI measure has identified the cohort as having a medium to high risk of re-offending. With this in mind, we use these predisposing factors as a method of distinguishing among the cohort and highlighting the varying processes of desistance required by our high- and low-end outliers.

CONCLUSION

Despite the tight grouping of RoC*RoI scores offering an objective measure of similarity within the cohort – that being a higher risk profile of re-offending – it became obvious that there were seemingly significant differences between many participants that we were subsequently able to quantify. At the ends of this spectrum of difference are groups we have labelled high and low-end outliers. Whether this has any meaning for recidivism generally is unclear and would require a sample group of persisters to assess. Notwithstanding that ambiguity, these groups do offer interesting lenses with which to view different desistance processes and we use them in this way throughout this report.

5. PRISON AS A DETERRENT

The value of incarceration as a deterrent is a controversial subject and is one that tends to divide opinion. In relation to desistance, no clear consensus has been formed by available research (see, for example, Mulvey et al 2004; Carpenter, 2012; Michalsen, 2013).

The findings of the current study, however, are unequivocal that prison worked as a deterrent, although this is qualified by the fact that our cohort is exclusively made up of those who have desisted. Furthermore, prison was not the only factor involved in the decision to desist. As will become evident, there were other – often more important – factors, but without question prison played a significant role in triggering a desire to desist. For many, prison manifested itself as a realisation of action and consequences, and provided a practical reason and opportunity to begin desisting. The present section examines prison as a deterrent and the factors that participants identified as influencing deterrence, including fear, boredom, and a sense of not fitting in among other prisoners. It will also outline how for many participants incarceration became a positive experience.

THE INFLUENCE OF INCARCERATION

Seventy-eight percent (n=40) of the cohort reported that the experience of being sent to prison deterred them from further crime.

This effect of prison was most often emphatically stated:

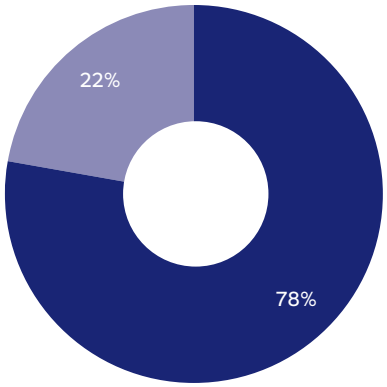
> No, no, no, no, no way I want to go back there. Hell no.

> Oh yeah, shit, that's what made me turn my shit around, I didn't ever want to go there again...Yeah, yeah it was *bad*.

> I pretty much got scared straight. I like my freedom. I like being able to do the littlest things like going to the fridge at night and grabbing a drink.

Importantly, this deterrent effect was specifically linked to the prison sentence

PRISON AS A DETERRENT



> **Sentence length did not appear to be a factor in deterrence. The key event was prison itself.**

and not to punishment generally. Many had been subjected to non-custodial sentences without activating a desire to desist:

> [If not for prison] I'd probably still be taking things for granted. It wasn't till I actually got my freedom taken away from me [that I changed].

> Nothing really fazed me, because I'd always get told "you're going to jail this time" and then go to court and I'd get more community work, and then I just wouldn't go to my community work, so I'd think I got away with it.

Sentence length did not appear to be a factor in deterrence. The key event was imprisonment itself:

> I learned my lesson within the first two weeks, I would say. Even a month would have been plenty. That's enough to realise...

This is supported by the data for those doing shorter and longer sentences. Taking our average sentence length served of 248 days (approximately 8.1 months) as a marker, meaning 249 and above is 'long' and 247 and below is 'short', we find that the reported deterrent effect was almost identical among both groups, with 80 percent (n=16) of those on 'long' sentences reporting that prison had a deterrent effect, and 83 percent (n=25) of those on 'short' sentences.

For some, the desistance mindset had already started, so where prison acted as a deterrent, it did so only in a supplementary way:

> Well, see, when I ended up in prison, I had already realised, at that point, I didn't ever wanna do something like that again. And prison just reinforced that for me.

While the fact that prison had a deterrent effect for a large sector of the sample is undeniable, it is also nuanced. Participants had various explanations as to why this was so, and often these factors worked in combination with one another.

FEAR

For the majority, a powerful element of the deterrence experience was fear. Prison for many was a terrifying place, particularly on arrival. For a number of participants this was the time – the first night of their sentence – that the decision to desist was first reached; and for many it was a decision that held fast, meaning that desistance can be narrowed down to a single point in time:

> Yeah I could tell you the exact time mate. As soon as that screw locked the door to my cell, about I'd say at least half a dozen skinheads in my unit yelling out shit saying they're gonna see me in the morning... I promised myself I was never f**kin' putting myself in that situation again.

> "I sentence you to nine months in prison". That was literally the moment where I went, f**k this, I don't want this happening again, I'm not this kind of person. Man, I was scared that day.

Fear was strongly reported by those who had served their time in youth units. This was further emphasised by those 15 participants who experienced both youth and adult units – all but one of those participants reported the youth units were a more frightening place to be due to the behaviour of inmates:

> I think on my first day I came out, I never said anything, I just went and had my breakfast, and I think on the way to breakfast [I got] called up for a fight at least four times...The mainstream jail, they were a bit more relaxed because some of the guys had been to jail like, half a dozen times. Whereas the youth it was kinda their first time in jail and they had a point to prove...
>
> You know when you're just off the street, you're gonna go into prison still with that whole street attitude, so you want to try and make a name for yourself as quickly as you can, so that everyone remembers *your* name. Then you become somebody. In mainstream that doesn't apply so much.

Given that the purpose of youth units is to provide a more appropriate environment for young offenders, a finding that they were widely reported as being more frightening places than adult institutions is worthy of note. Notwithstanding this, there may have been some element of becoming accustomed to prison. Although participants did not specifically report this, fear did tend to subside over time.

While fear was a significant factor, it tended to be an expectation of what *could* happen rather than being based on actual experiences of personal harm. Many participants reported finding people who 'looked out' for them or took them under their wing, and while numerous participants said they had fights or confrontations, none reported serious physical personal harm. Furthermore, the fear of prison tended to fade over time, as the prisoners became accustomed to the institution. At this point, where it remained an issue, fear was due to sporadic rather than constant threat in both adult and youth institutions.

LOSS OF FREEDOM AND AUTONOMY

Although dominant, fear was not always the primary factor influencing deterrence, and even when it was it was often juxtaposed with the boredom and isolation of prison life. For many participants, not enjoying everyday freedoms weighed heavily in favour of their decision to desist or to consider desisting:

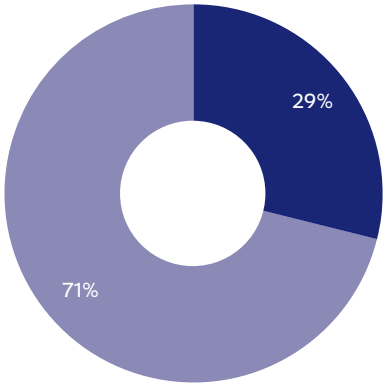
> I didn't want to go back, that was one main factor. You know how like I said it was easy at the time. It is easy, like it's not as scary as you think, but the time in there is so hard because every day is just so long.
>
> When you go to jail, you get everything taken away. Not everything, but the little things that you enjoy, you really think about. Well for me personally, I'd rather be a bum on a park bench, watching the world go by, than losing my freedom like that again.
>
> I couldn't stand it, it was amazingly boring.

Given that the purpose of youth units is to provide a more appropriate environment for young offenders, a finding that they were widely reported as being more frightening places than adult institutions is worthy of note.

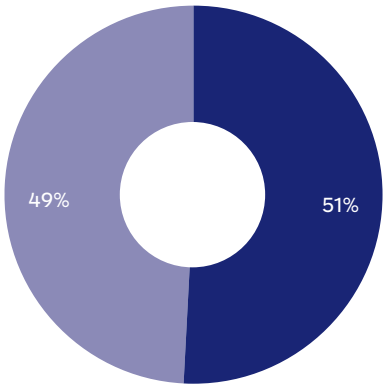
Supporting the work of Michalsen (2013) who found that desisters (women, in that particular study) when triggered by poor experiences in prison often used their time to create new plans, many of our study's participants turned the boredom into a positive experience and used their time to consider changing their lives. Prison became a break from the outside world and its influences, where many of those who wished to, were able to take the time to re-think their priorities:

> Oh, hell yes. I went in as a complete arsehole, about fighting, drugs, everything, and when I came out, I'd quit the drugs, I'd quit smoking, I'd stopped fighting. I had the time, you know, with nothing else to do, to just think. To just realise that that is a stupid path I'm going down.

SELF PERCEPTION



PUBLIC PERCEPTION



> **Entering the prison, many felt alienated and out of place within the prison population, which served to catalyse their desire to change.**

NOT 'FITTING IN'

A further element triggering decisions to desist was the realisation that many participants did not 'fit in' in jail – that there was a difference, real or perceived, between the participant and the majority of other prisoners and/or a desire not to mimic the lives of older prisoners who had been in and out of prison for years. The importance of this distinction is highlighted when we look at participants' perceptions of their own criminality: when asked whether they saw themselves as a criminal at the time of their offending, nearly three quarters (n=36) of the sample responded that they did not. Overwhelmingly, participants recalled understanding their behaviour as being normal, "just a bit of fun", or simply survival:

> No, I always thought I was always doing it to get through. Taking what I need to get through. But now, I know it's a problem now. But when I did it, I didn't really care nor think.

> I mean, I know it wasn't right, but there's a difference between not right and criminal, you know.

When asked whether they were likely to have been perceived as criminal by members of their community (before being accused of crime) however, more than half of participants (n=26) reported that they would have been.

This points to a major misapprehension within our cohort: although most did not believe that they were 'criminals', many of the people around them did, and in all cases their sentences confirmed that in some sense, they were. When faced with the sanction of imprisonment, then, these identities were called into question in a way that could not be ignored. In this way prison became a turning point because it forced participants to address and value the distinctions between themselves and the 'real' criminals that they met in jail – and often a recognition of the life that awaits a continuation of criminal behaviour. Entering the prison, many felt alienated and out of place within the prison population, which served to catalyse their desire to change:

> That's exactly what happened, actually, because I looked at people in there with ten, fifteen, even thirty years older than me, and I was like, do I really wanna carry on doing what I'm doing and still be like them, ten, twenty years down the road?
>
> Prison deterred me a lot, and to see the muppets in there too, you know, the guys you could tell, they'd spent years in juvie and years in and out of the correctional facilities and stuff. Just their mental attitude and their mentality. It wasn't life.

The influence of this effect is linked to the concentration of predisposing factors found among our cohort: none of the low-end outliers reported having thought of themselves as criminal, whereas ten of the fifteen that did were high-end outliers.

POSITIVE EXPERIENCE IN HINDSIGHT

Despite most participants reporting that prison was arduous, many observed that in hindsight incarceration proved to be an important and fundamental turning point in their lives. Sixty-five percent of the cohort reported feeling that overall, prison was in some way a positive, or at least necessary, experience for them.

> It was, for the time that I was in there, it was a hell of an eye opener, and it probably was a good experience for somebody like myself. I was in there, and I realised when I was in there, it's no life, I don't want to come back here.
>
> Yep, I deserved... I had deserved to go, and I'm glad I did go, cause it was particularly a big wake up call.

A CAUTION TO DETERRENCE

Despite the strong findings relating to deterrence among participants, it must be remembered that our research sample is made up solely of desisters. We have no group of persisters to compare them with. Given that our cohort is statistically a minority among young offenders (in that they have not gone on to re-offend), they may represent an anomaly rather than the norm with regard to deterrence. Although we cannot test this hypothesis, an indication may be provided by our high-end outliers, who were more than twice as likely as the desisters to report that prison was not a deterrent – five of the high-end outliers were not deterred, whereas only two of the low-end outliers were undeterred by prison. This perhaps indicates that the deterrent effect may be less pronounced among higher-risk offenders.

> **...a number of participants reported that prison introduced them to criminal skills and ideas that could have assisted a progression into further criminality.**

Furthermore, a number of participants reported that prison introduced them to criminal skills and ideas that could have assisted a progression into further criminality. Even for those who had no intention of returning to crime, the company that they kept in prison (especially for those on longer sentences) was reported as providing them with a 'criminal education':

> Prison to me was like a school for criminals, you put a bunch of criminals together for doing their shit and all they're gonna do is talk about what they should have done rather than what they did do. You just learn everything that's wrong, and you're around the worst kind of people...
>
> That's the question I knew you were going to ask. It actually made me a worse criminal. Ten times more. I went in there like I didn't know anything, I came out I knew so much, I knew how the gangs run, I knew how drugs run, I knew how to do certain things. I knew a lot. I got a gangster education [laughs].

In our cohort, however, only two specifically reported putting any of this pro-criminal education into practice post-prison before desisting fully.

CONCLUSION

The issue of prison as a deterrent, then, is a significant finding. Without question, for a large portion of this cohort prison was a trigger that led to a desire to change, a wakeup call that was – in hindsight, at least – often appreciated as an important period of change. The drivers of this change were not uniform in each participant and the different factors were often mutually reinforcing. The primary factors include: fear; a loss of freedom; a realisation of where a criminal lifestyle will take them; and a sense that they did not 'fit in' with other prisoners. Despite the importance of prison in beginning or reinforcing the decision to desist, it is necessary to be mindful that the cohort under analysis were all desisters and therefore this finding does not prove the overall efficacy of prison as a deterrent. Even within this study one should not judge the influence of custodial sentences in isolation from numerous other influential factors that triggered desistance. As will become clear, when other factors are included, the deterrent effect of prison, while most widely acknowledged, was not always most acutely felt.

6. DESISTANCE: TIMING AND INFLUENCES

As noted in the previous section, prison was reported as a deterrent by the majority of the sample. Unsurprisingly then, prison was the place where most desistance began. This section outlines when the decision to desist occurred, examines the major elements that triggered it, and highlights the ways in which it was achieved – primarily through a strong sense of agency and a desire to move away from the consequences of crime.

DESISTANCE TIMING

For 59 percent of the cohort (n=30), prison was where the desistance process began, while for 27 percent (n=14) it began before incarceration, usually at the time of arrest. The remainder made their desistance decision almost immediately on leaving prison (n=4) or sometime after release (n=3).

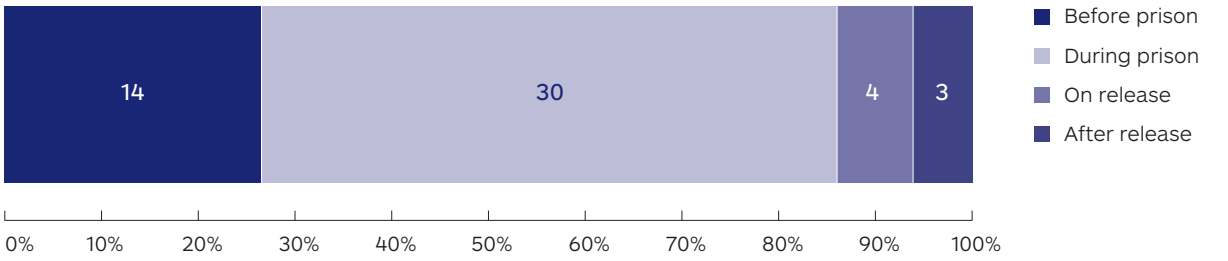
As in much desistance literature (Bushway, Piquero, Broidy, Cauffman, & Mazerolle, 2001; Maruna, 1999), this study found a split between those whose desistance decision occurred quickly and those for whom the decision to desist was slower. For the latter group, who were in the minority, there was no conscious choice, or identifiable point where desistance occurred – instead it was a change in behaviour and thinking that developed over time:

> I've never really thought about this. I reckon it was a gradual process mate because I just turned into a different person.

Most, though, could pinpoint a moment when this cognitive 'switch' occurred – a conscious choice to change their lives, which was often triggered by a key event like arrest or imprisonment:

> I was sitting there bloody weeks, first day I was in there I was thinking f**k this, what have I done, I'm finally here. It took me a couple of days to click, and then *bang*, f**k this, never coming back here again.

TIME OF DECISION TO DESIST



Whether it occurred quickly or gradually, the 'switch' that is triggered that turns people away from crime is fundamental. Whether it happened as a result of one particular factor or due to more subtle changes and influences over time (what might be described as a 'maturing out' of crime), all participants reached a place where they no longer made, or no longer wanted to make, decisions to offend. Reaching a decision not to commit crime is key and universal among the cohort, and this is mirrored in the findings of other research (Leibrich, 1993). Even among those whose decision came gradually, presence of a change in thinking was clear, although only in hindsight. The importance of this is perhaps self-evident – whether for example beating an addiction or losing weight – a point where an individual makes a decision to change must be reached. Even the two participants who continued to commit some serious crime now saw it as wrong – a significant difference to their past criminal behaviour.

With regard to the decision to desist we see key differences between our outlier groups. Eight of the 13 low-end outliers made a decision to desist before prison compared with only two of the high-end outliers. Similarly, none of the low-end outliers reported desistance being a longer process, whereas five of the high-end outliers reported returning to crime after their release and then gradually working into desistance.

> While much shaming can create stigma and effectively encourage criminal behaviour, reintegrative shaming helps to reduce it.

In examining the desistance process, then, there is considerable variety regarding when and how its start is triggered. But there are a number of issues and elements that were both common and important.

THE INFLUENCE OF FAMILY AND THE IMPORTANCE OF 'REINTEGRATIVE SHAMING'

One frequently reported element that triggered the decision to desist for more than half of the sample was feelings of guilt around letting down parents and family members. Fifty-seven percent (n=29) of the cohort reported that the shame of disappointing family members, primarily their mothers, was significant and more acute than the deterrent effect of prison. This appears to have worked as a form of what Braithwaite (1989) has called 'reintegrative shaming'. While much shaming can create stigma and effectively encourage criminal behaviour, reintegrative shaming helps to reduce it. When a participant identified parental disappointment as being influential to their desistance, it was almost always seen as extremely significant. For many, it was the hinge upon which their life change turned:

> I wasn't scared of jail, because I was sweet in there ... [but] just seeing how broken my family was, that really hit home, yeah.

> One of them was probably my parents, how hard they work, how hard they tried to support us when they were working all that time, put us through school. [...] It wasn't a happy thing for me to give back to them after all that effort.

> Yeah, stealing off her and hurting her by going to jail, I don't know, it's hard to explain, just the different expressions on her face like that you know, [that] was the bit that hurt.

Once again, there is a significant difference in relation to disappointing family among our outliers. Of the low-end outliers 10 stated the importance of family shame, while just 4 of the high-end outliers did. While family shame was crucial overall, then, it was much more likely to influence those from stable family backgrounds than it was those with family dysfunction.

THE IMPORTANCE OF AGENCY

Complementing the idea of a cognitive switch is a further common element related to desistance, that being a sense of individual agency; a personal belief in the ability to change.

Fostering agency and self-determination is seen as important in promoting desistance (Farall, Maruna, & McNeill, 2012) and one element common to our sample was the fact that a person's decision to turn their life around was something they had to do themselves. Few voiced any great difficulty in reaching this conclusion and then following it through – quite the contrary, in fact – and often participants expressed surprise that it might be seen as difficult. In this way there appeared a strong sense of agency, and the decision to change had to be personal:

> Yeah well, when you lose all you've got, they're not going to pick you up anymore, there's no one out there that's gonna do it. So you pick your own ass up and move on and do it yourself. So that's what I ended up doing.

> At the end of the day mate, people who do crime and have been to jail and stuff like that, it's either, it's a lifestyle that they've been brought up with, or they've chosen to do it... but it takes that person to make that change. There's that saying you can lead a horse to the river just for a drink, but it's up to the horse to drink it. That's what it comes down to mate, it's up to the person if they want the help.

This sense of agency correlated with participants taking responsibility for their crimes. Rarely did participants frame themselves as victims of circumstance or look to lay blame elsewhere. There was a common acceptance that their involvement in crime was their own choice. Many recognised certain outside influences on their behaviour, but they seldom shied away from responsibility. This correlation between accepting responsibility and a perception of being able to change could mean that offenders are more capable of future change if there is an acknowledgment and acceptance of fault in past behaviour.

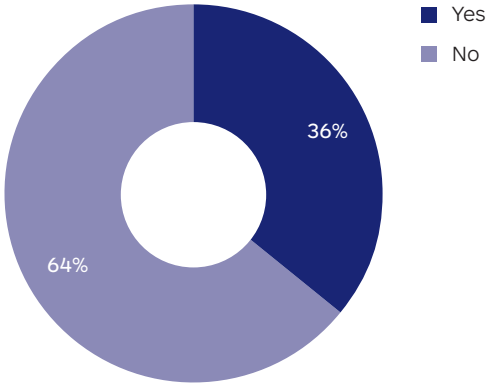
Apart from the obvious desistance from crime, some ways in which this agency most obviously manifested itself was in reducing alcohol or drug use and shedding criminal associations. These elements are covered in Sections 9 and 10 respectively.

ACCEPTING GUILT

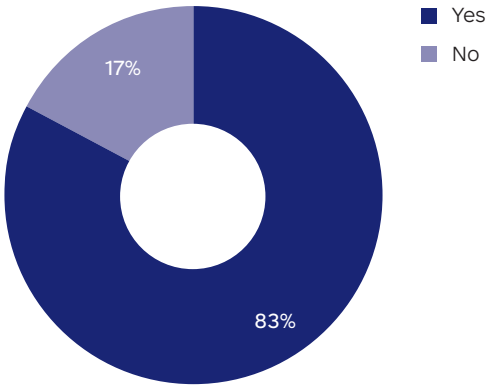
As noted in Section 5, the sanction of prison forced many among our cohort to accept that their actions were criminal in nature, but many participants also reported experiencing a significant change in how they viewed the victims of their crimes.

At the time of their offending, the majority (n=30) of participants reported feeling little to no guilt or empathy for their victims. In many cases, there was a half-hearted attempt to rationalise their harms, but overall few felt any connection with their victims, who were often understood only as empty houses or "just a car on the side of the road". Where they were present at all, these rationalisations tended to consider the victim in economic, rather than in human terms:

FEELINGS OF GUILT AT TIME OF OFFENDING



FEELINGS OF GUILT AT TIME OF INTERVIEW



At the time of their offending, the majority of participants reported feeling little to no guilt or empathy for their victims.

> I always justified it. "Oh they've got insurance, they're gonna get it all back, I'm robbing the company, not them".
>
> I always would think like, "oh yeah, the government would repair it".

For some, this distinction was important to being able to engage in crime:

> One of the things, though, is when you run in a house, never look at the photos. Never look at the photos. You get that guilty conscience, eh. Don't look at any photos. I never laid an eye on one photo. That's what I was taught.

By the time of interview, however, this disconnection from personal guilt had changed significantly. More than three quarters of participants (n=39) said that they felt guilty for what they had done. For many, coming to terms with the harm that they had caused was a part of their choice to avoid crime, and this tended to begin with being caught. Victim impact statements and restorative justice meetings brought some participants into contact with their victims for the first time:

> I got paired up with a woman who'd been the victim of a crime that I'd done, not me, but burglary on a big scale. She was real standoffish, didn't want... but that's the thing, she started crying on my shoulder the same day, saying "oh no I expected some kind of monster but you're just a little boy". "My kids have been scared to sleep, thinking there's a boogie man about to jump out of the closet... we've had to move house because the kids can't sleep and they don't want to be here."
>
> Massive impact, I was like, wow. I never took any of that into account. I've always been like business, thinking money and effect on their financial situation, which was no effect whatsoever, which is why I was ok about it. So I got past it fine until that.

> That [restorative justice meeting] was actually pretty gutting. It happened a couple of times. I met with one victim that was deaf, and we'd been in their car and nicked some stuff. That was quite an eye opener, made me feel pretty bad.

Not all participants ceased crime after these events – those who attended restorative justice meetings before prison, for example, rarely desisted until their prison sentence brought a range of other factors to bear. Although beyond our expertise to assess definitively, by our estimation none of the participants showed evidence of being pathologically incapable of, or unaffected by, guilt – rather, it was simply a matter of breaking down the barriers to this guilt that they had erected. For some, this was simple, but for others it was a gradual process that took place alongside other elements of desistance.

A CHANGE AWAY RATHER THAN TOWARD

Notwithstanding the fact that some of the cohort had to change very little, for most participants when the decision to desist was made (whether quickly or over a longer period), they reported subsequently having strong ideas of what they were changing away from – that being criminality and its attendant lifestyle. This meant giving up things like criminal friendships and reducing the intake of drugs and alcohol. Few participants, however, had firm ideas about what they wanted to achieve after having desisted. While 49 percent (n=25) reported they had some future plans, these tended to be vague and basic in nature. For example where getting work was discussed by 14 of those participants, only five identified having had specific plans about what that might be.

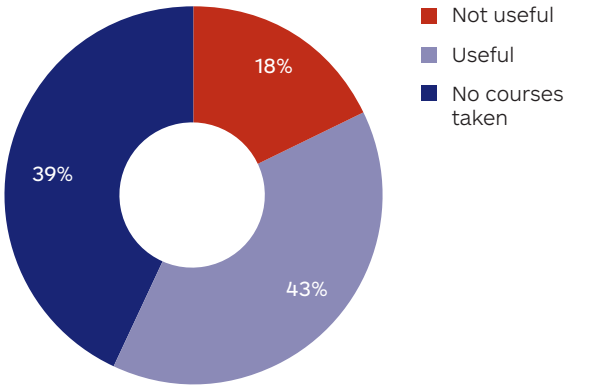
CONCLUSION

For most of this cohort, desistance happened quickly once a decision was taken. It came from a firm commitment to change, and this was most often sparked by arrest or imprisonment. Others appeared to undertake a slow, less conscious change that culminated in the pursuit of a crime free life. One of the primary motivations for this change was the perception of hurt or embarrassment felt by at least one parent. For most this was seen a primary trigger of change, a fundamental motivation to pursue a different life. Participants overwhelmingly stated that the decision was one that they alone had to make, but importantly, it was one that they felt they *could* make. This may be tied to the fact that there was an equally strong sense of personal responsibility and guilt associated with the offending. The link between accepting responsibility for the criminal behaviour, therefore, may be tied to recognising the effect of crime on others, coupled with a sense of ability to change – although this hypothesis could only be tested against a similar cohort of persisters. More clearly, those who needed to make significant changes from their previous lifestyle were often motivated more by the desire to escape their old life than by the pull of a new one.

7. PROGRAMMES AND PROBATION

Apart from incarceration itself, programmes and courses targeting prisoners, as well as the probation service, are the primary non-punitive means that the Department of Corrections uses to modify offender behaviour. This section outlines participants' experiences with both, and examines the roles that they were perceived to play within the desistance process as support or enabling factors.

USEFULNESS OF COURSES TAKEN DURING PRISON/PROBATION



PROGRAMMES OR COURSES

The majority (n=29) of the cohort reported doing some form of programmes or courses provided or facilitated by the Department of Corrections either during prison or after their release.[13] The majority of these programmes and courses were undertaken in prison, and for those who did not participate in any, it was often because their sentence was not long enough for them to be placed in one.

In most cases participant recall was not sufficient to specify the exact names of the programmes or courses undertaken, and many struggled to recall basic details

[13] It should be noted too that our purpose here was not to assess or evaluate different programmes – the sample size for each was not large enough – but simply to determine whether programmes had an effect on desistance.

about what they had undertaken. Based on this uncertain data, a range of drug and alcohol, educational, cultural, and criminogenic programmes and courses were identified. Nine participants reported attending alcohol or drug programmes of various kinds, eight reported education or work skills courses, and seven reported criminogenic programmes (such as Stopping Violence, STURP etc.). A further five reported seeing counsellors or attending group therapy while in prison.

Some 69 percent (n=20) of those who reported that they completed a programme or course said the course was useful in some way. While no participants credited courses with being the primary reason for the decision to desist, programmes and courses were widely said to have reinforced that decision or facilitated it. Those participants who reported benefit from programmes and courses did so along a continuum from significant benefit to minor. Often, however, benefits were confused with enjoyment, while some others reported courses or programmes being a waste of time, but when probed further stated that some benefits were gained.[14]

These courses were reported to be useful to participants for a range of reasons, the most significant of which was as a support to desistance (either by providing criminogenic help, building confidence, or developing life skills), which was identified by 15 participants. A further five reported that their programmes were useful because they provided work skills, and two because they helped them overcome addiction (two participants reported two reasons).

Among those who found programmes to be useful for desistance, just one participant reported an in-prison programme (group counselling) as being fundamental to triggering his change, while most said that they simply offered tools to make the transition easier; for

For the participants who engaged in any programmes or courses, the most significant influence was the person in charge, and the relationship they had with that person.

example, by equipping the person with life skills, a way of thinking to change their use of drugs or alcohol, or the creation of curricula vitae. In this way these skills acted as supporting factors for desistance:

> Well they teach you life skills and discipline, very disciplined. They'd teach you how to shop for a week and... I didn't know. I'd [ordinarily] go buy McDonald's but they'd say to you, "why buy this crap, for ten dollars you can buy this". Stuff like that.

> Violence prevention programme I think it was called. It was really good, really good. It was really useful for me...in the course you sorta find yourself a bit better, spiritually and mentally. I think it went for six months, I had to do once a week. It was a group. I can see that it wouldn't work for everyone but it worked for me. It has definitely helped.

In some other cases these skills were key tools such as anger management or coping strategies that may have helped to prevent specific instances of crime:

> It was a bit, you know, keeping myself out of situations that I might get in trouble and that. It pulled me back a bit I think. You know, I think I'm fairly safe [now], you know, I mean I don't put myself in [those] situations.

A further two people (who are not included in the data above) were put on a Limited Service Volunteer (LSV) course[15] by Work and Income New Zealand following their release. While one was ambivalent toward the course, the other was definite in stating that it was fundamental to his turn-around. Although he was reluctant

[14] For this reason, participant satisfaction with programmes has not been used as a measure here.

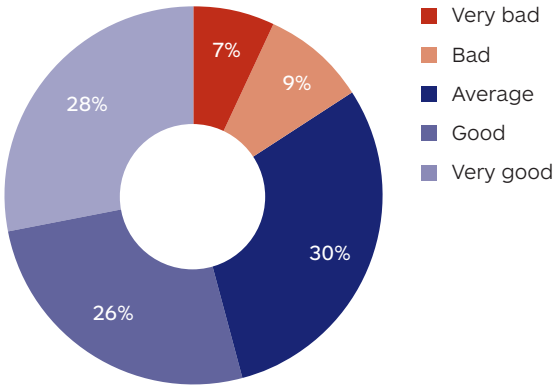
[15] LSV is run by the New Zealand Defence Force on behalf of Work and Income, and aims to give participants life skills, work skills, and build confidence over a six week course of military-style training.

to attend LSV he quickly found that it interested him and equipped him with the self-esteem and practical skills to change his life. The LSV course highlights the very clear issue that what works for one person may not work for another.

To maximise the chances that any programmes and courses will have a positive effect on desistance, they must somehow connect with the person taking them. For the participants who engaged in any programmes or courses, the most significant influence was the person in charge, and the relationship they had with that person. Among those who positively recalled a specific course in detail, all spoke about the importance of the people running them. Because it was not specifically asked of participants, the data in this area is incomplete, but a small number of participants elaborated that they felt a person who had 'been there, done that' was more impressive than a 'university type':

> The main thing what's good about the Maori ones, the Maori one that I done, the dude was a crook, he was a criminal, like he'd sat in the exact seat that I was sitting in, like literally he'd sat in the exact same jail. So he was telling us about how it'd affected him and how he'd changed his life. His name was Rocky. He was the man. I'm not saying that I would, but he was the one that confirmed it for me, like you could go out of jail and not ever come back to jail.

QUALITY OF RELATIONSHIP WITH PROBATION OFFICER



In at least two cases, participants reported using multiple programmes of the same or similar nature (e.g. A&D counselling), but reported that only one was of value. In both cases, the primary differentiating factor was the person running the course.

PROBATION

The experience of dealing with the probation service elicited sharply divided opinion. This was evident within the cohort generally, but individual participants also had divergent views with regard to their relationships with their probation officers: whether or not the officer had their best interests in mind, and whether the service overall assisted in their desistance.

Eighty-two percent of participants (n=42) reported having had supervision from a probation officer. Interactions with probation staff were largely positive: more than half of those participants (n=23) rated their relationship with their probation officer as good or very good, and less than a quarter (n=7) rated it as bad or very bad.

While some participants struggled to recall their probation officer, where firm views were held on the nature of the relationship, they tended to be strongly expressed:

> I had a very good probation officer. They were just a nice person. They knew you'd been inside, and um, actually try to help you along, you know, just try to get you along your bloody path to rehabilitation. It helped too because I was already feeling good by myself, I wasn't like still feeling like a mongrel and all that shit.

> I ended up clashing with him about [a faulty ankle bracelet], and was like "you're a c**t, you were willing to send me back to prison for something that wasn't my fault". And I tried explaining it to him nice and civilly before this, but he was just like "nah, recall". And so I was like "I want a new probation officer, you're f**kin' useless; you're incompetent".

Those participants who had had more than one officer often reported vastly different experiences with them – which suggests differences in the quality of probation officers and may demonstrate a mismatch of personalities and expectations.

The quality of the personal relationship between participants and their probation officers, however, did not necessarily represent a perception that the officer had the participant's best interests in mind. Only 38 percent (n=16) of participants that had been on probation believed that their officer was interested in helping them. These participants felt that probation were just 'ticking boxes' and going through the motions. This, in turn, often led to a similar approach from participants:

> I mean they'd always ask me questions about the drug and alcohol counselling and I'd probably give them the same answer. To me I wasn't sure whether it was a lie or whether it was the truth at the time. But I was just telling them what they wanted to hear.

> He was an idiot. He didn't know anything that was going on. That whole thing was a waste of my time. I'd go there, tell them what they wanted to hear, then go out and do the opposite of what they say. "You better abide by your curfew"; I was out breaking my curfew every night.

Similarly, less than a quarter of participants believed that probation had anything to do with their desistance from crime: Just 23 percent (n=10) said their probation officer had any impact in helping them change. Of those who did report influences, five put this down to personal support (all of whom said they considered their officer to be a friend), four considered their officer to be an extension of prison's deterrent effect, and one valued the practical support that they offered.

> I had a pretty close relationship with them. They knew me, what I was like, and he used to keep an eye out for me anyway... he'd always ask how I was, what I'd been up to, and if I needed anything. He offered me his support as well: "if you'd like to come over and have dinner, we'd love to have you..."

> Them personally? Nah, but the cloud over my head of, *f**k, if I f**k up I'm on parole, I'm back in jail*, did. Sort of created that lifestyle for me to have nothing to do with crime. And I guess it sort of carried on a little bit.

These participants felt that probation were just 'ticking boxes' and going through the motions.

Furthermore, for those in work and entrenched in a desistance mind-set, probation was often something that inhibited rather than encouraged their transition to a pro-social life:

> It probably pissed me off more than anything, having to make an effort to go to the place, it was generally a hard place to go to, it was two busses, it made life harder, especially having a job... When you make an appointment, they're only open til 4:30, and you finish work at 5, so to get a bus from where I was working, I might as well not have gone to work that day.

> I think that if I was a newly released prisoner having to deal with probation, I would probably be driven up the wall back to crime... The red tape that they put up around you makes it very difficult to integrate yourself, even with their help, into the community... for me personally it was very difficult to find employment, very difficult to go and visit my family, very difficult to go away for a day over the hill, it was very just red tape, red tape, red tape. I couldn't apply for jobs without running it past them.

Other studies have found a similar reporting by offenders that probation has not helped in terms of desistance (Farrall & Calverly, 2006; Leibrich, 1993). Many of this study's participants felt that probation had nothing to do with helping them to make a change, but rather existed simply to monitor them. These findings support research showing that the efficacy of

probation is often questioned because offenders feel that they receive little support in their efforts to desist and that probation is more concerned with security than rehabilitation (Bottoms, Shapland, Costello, Holmes & Muir, 2004). In this sense, then, probation appears to have done little to assist the majority of our participants in desisting from crime.

CONCLUSION

Although they were not instrumental in triggering desistance, programmes and courses often provided tools that helped maintain the decision to desist. Given this, it was practical skills that were valued most highly; from elementary functions such as learning to build a CV through to psychological tools that helped to avoid the behaviours that led to crime. An important element of courses or programmes was the quality of the relationship with the person running them. Interestingly, while relationships with staff were important to the perceived efficacy of programmes and courses, in regard to the probation service a positive personal relationship did not always manifest itself in valued outcomes. While probation officers were viewed more positively than negatively, the service itself was not often credited with assisting participants to desist. Indeed, the perceived inflexibility of the service was often viewed as counterproductive.

8. SUPPORT REQUIRED

Transitioning from prison to the community on release is a critical phase in a prisoner's post release life. For a small number of participants the transition involved returning to the relatively normal lives they led before imprisonment, and for an even smaller number it was a time when old habits of criminality were resumed. For most, however, the point of release was when the practical part of desistance began in earnest; when a criminal or antisocial lifestyle was replaced by a non-criminal and pro-social one. This section looks at the vital role that support, particularly from families, had on successful desistance.

SOURCES OF SUPPORT

Two participants in our study reported becoming more criminally active after prison, before eventually desisting.[16] For the rest of the cohort the importance of this transitional period could not have been clearer. This was true not only of the high-end outliers who had to make significant changes to their pre-prison lifestyle, but also for some of the low-end outliers who reported that the adjustment returning to the community from prison was difficult. In this transition period, a vital factor for an overwhelming majority of participants was some form of pro-social personal support. Some 94 percent of participants (n=48) reported the importance of post release support. Of these, 70 percent (n=34) claimed that support was vital to successful transition while 30 percent (n=13) said that support

[16] These are distinct from the participants that are still criminally active, all of whom began attempting to desist at the time of their release, and all but one of whom reported having ceased the offending for which they were imprisoned.

In this transition period, a vital factor for an overwhelming majority of participants was some form of pro-social personal support.

had some influence on their desistance or on setting them on the track to a crime-free life. In short, for a large majority of the cohort, support was fundamental to their life direction and transition might not have been successful without it:

> I can't imagine going to something like that and coming out to nothing...
>
> I would have struggled. I would have actually - to be honest with you - there is no way that I can comprehend how I would have coped without the assistance that I was given. I just can't. It frightens me to think about what would have happened.
>
> Oh yeah bro. Critical. I would have went back to the mates and who knows what would have happened, I could have been in there to this day. I could have graduated to murders or armed robbery. I was getting there.

Parental support has been found to be important to desistance among offenders, even among those aged in their early twenties (Bottoms, Shapland, Costello, Holmes & Muir, 2004). This was strongly borne out in this study.

Some 85 percent (n=41) of those who received any support said it came from family.[17] For some participants this meant reconnecting or developing previously broken or strained familial relationships:

> Me and my mum hadn't spoken for years, now we're close as. I couldn't have done it without her.

Where support did not come from family it was provided by close, pro-social, friends. Often there was a range of support. Forty-six percent (n=22) of those that received support claimed more than one support source.

Sources of support included: family (n=41), friends (n=14), employers or ex employers (n=3), partners' families (n=2), counsellors (n=2), partners (n=4), NGOs (n=2) a youth group, and a teacher. None reported receiving support from criminal friends, although one participant received support from a criminal partner.

ELEMENTS OF SUPPORT

The primary elements of support during the transition period were both practical and emotional. Practical support came mainly through having somewhere to stay (n=40) and readjust upon release; it provided a base from which plans could be made for life beyond jail. Critically, it also provided a place away from negative peer influences, as discussed in Section 10. In this way, positive influences were just as important as protection from negative ones.

> You need your family, if you don't have family you're f**ked.

At least two participants remained in their 'support' house, the family home, at time of interview, many years after release, while others moved out as soon as they were able. Practical support in relation to accommodation, then, was often quite short in length, just a few weeks, but enough time to adjust and find one's feet. Those who stayed with supporters for a short period did not value the support any less.

A further practical issue of support was help in finding employment, and this will be expanded on in Section 11.

[17] This finding displays correlation with positive shaming: of the 7 who reported that they did not receive any support of any kind from family members (excluding partners) after their release from prison, none reported any positive shaming.

The other component of support, the emotional value of it, was identified by 78 percent of participants (n=40).[18] Emotional support was often just having somebody to talk to and for moral support, but it sometimes manifested itself in practical situations when supporters actively helped participants or intervened when they were perhaps at risk:

> She tells me "I'm really proud" and all that stuff, which does help, definitely does. It's good to hear feedback when I've been trying so hard to keep out of it.

> You know I still like to have a few beers and that's probably where I am most vulnerable to do crime and anything like that. It's just like ..so yeah. If they see it, they quickly take me out of the situation. I do go happily but sometimes I don't.. But in the morning I say thank you. Shot mum for taking me out of that one. You know it could have ended up another way.

> I felt mentally unstable when I was released from prison because Corrections didn't know what they were doing, I didn't know what I was doing, the only person who knew what he was doing was [support person] and he just took control of the situation. I owe everything to him.

Although the importance of support was critical for most, for a very small minority (n=3) support was considered unnecessary or unavailable. One participant had served just two weeks in prison and had no significant hurdles in modifying his life, and thus felt he did not need support, while another two claimed to have nobody they could turn to. They "had to go it alone", although one reported that he enjoyed probation because it 'gave me somebody to talk to'. For these participants, desistance was a lonely and solitary process. For one going it alone meant a few nights on an associate's couch before moving away to live in a camp ground, while the other moved into a hostel and lived a hermit-like existence.

The fact that these people maintained desistance without any significant support is of interest, but with such a small number it is difficult to draw meaningful conclusions, although it may speak to the resilience of the 'switch' in thinking required for desistance, discussed in Section 5. Supporting this idea are those participants who maintained desistance in the face of peer pressure on release, which will be outlined in Section 9. If the decision to desist has been made and is firm, then, in some instances at least, it appears able to withstand significant pressures.

In other parts of this report we have outlined significant differences between the low- and high-end outliers within the cohort. In terms of support, however, there are no discernable differences between these groups. Although one member of the high-end outliers had no support, the others enjoyed high levels of support that they viewed as extremely important. We can say at this point, therefore, that there are two things that bind our cohort together: the fact they have desisted from crime and the fact they enjoyed high levels of post release support.

CONCLUSION

Of all of the findings of this research, the value of support in the immediate period after release from prison was perhaps the clearest. Above all else, this was viewed by participants as contributing the most to their ability to move their lives in a positive direction. Family support was the most important source of support, but where this was not available, it was most likely from friends. Support generally involved having somewhere to stay post-prison, but emotional support also assisted the transition. Immediate post release support appears crucial to successful desistance.

[18] Although the same number (n=40) reported emotional support and housing support as being important, only 32 reported both.

9. CHANGES IN DRUG AND ALCOHOL USE

Given the links between drug and alcohol use and offending, looking at changes to drug and alcohol use and desistance is important. Mulvey et al. (2004) found that one significant element that separated desisters from persisters was lower levels of substance use. This section outlines the drug and alcohol use of the cohort before and after prison, and assesses the importance of the evident changes.

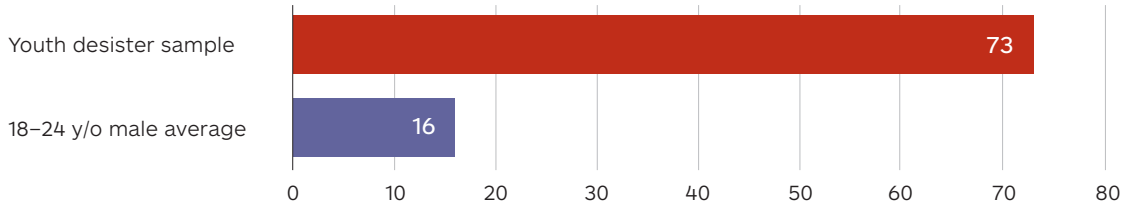
DRUGS: PRE-PRISON DRUG USE

Of our cohort, 78 percent (n=40) reported using drugs in the lead up to or during their offending. Of these, 100 percent were using marijuana and 35 percent were using harder drugs as well such as methamphetamine or other stimulants (n=8), ecstasy (n=2), and hallucinogens (n=2). One participant was huffing butane gas.

Overall, drug use by the cohort was significantly heavier than we would expect in the population generally. Certainly this is true of marijuana use, but the sample is too small to produce meaningful data in relation to other drugs. A survey of New Zealand drug use in 2010 reported that 21.5 percent of the male population aged 16 and 17 had used marijuana in the past year, and the number that reported using it weekly was "too low for reliable estimation". Of those aged 18 to 24, only 16 percent reported having used marijuana weekly (Ministry of Health, 2010). By contrast, 73 percent (n=36) of the research cohort's male participants[19] were at least

[19] Because our sample is predominantly male, the two female participants were removed here, and in the subsequent comparative graphs, for ease of comparison.

USING CANNABIS AT LEAST WEEKLY - PRE-PRISON



PERCENTAGE OF SAMPLE USING CANNABIS AT LEAST WEEKLY (MINISTRY OF HEALTH, 2010)

weekly users of marijuana, including 57 percent (n=28) who were using at least daily.

Of all drug users, 43 percent (n=21) reported that, in hindsight, their pre-prison use was a problem in so much as it negatively affected their lives.[20] Of the participants who used marijuana, 38 percent (n=18) reported that it was a problem. While five participants reported using 'harder drugs' more than once per week, four reported that it was a problem. Only two of these drug users, however, reported having considered their levels of use to be a problem while they were offending:

> [I'd smoke] all day. When I was in employment I'd sneak home for a puff, at lunch time things like that. It wasn't a need it was a necessity.
>
> *At that time did you think it was a problem for you?*
> Nah didn't find it a problem, nah not at all.
>
> *Looking back do you think it was a problem for you?*
> Yeah definitely, it got me in a lot of trouble. I didn't really care, you know.

Often the reported problem associated with drugs was not restricted to the physical effects of the drugs, but also included the antisocial peer associations that came with the drugs, and it was these associations that were often linked to offending. A number of participants

Overall, drug use by the cohort was significantly heavier than that what we would expect in the population generally.

reported that it was drug use that had alienated their pro-social influences and non-criminal friendship groups:

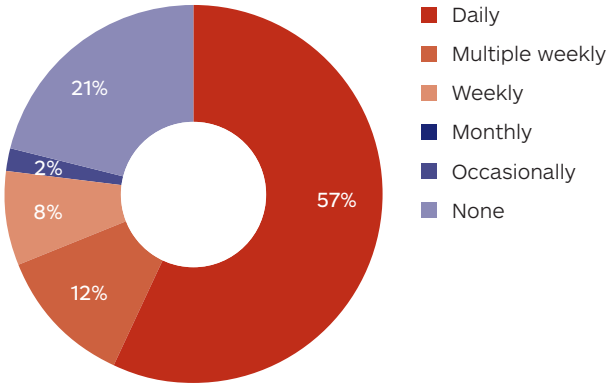
> Looking back it did cause problems for me. I used to hang around quite a big range of people, but when I started smoking I sorta drifted off, which isolated me from a lot of social things...
>
> Yeah, it was [a problem]. Yeah, it would have been, yeah. It was just the type of people I was hanging out with.

Reflecting this, just eleven of the cohort's drug users made a link between drug use and their offending. The reasons for this link varied: at least two were convicted (at least in part) because of involvement in the drug trade, and others offended in order to buy drugs or made bad decisions as a result of drug/alcohol impairment.

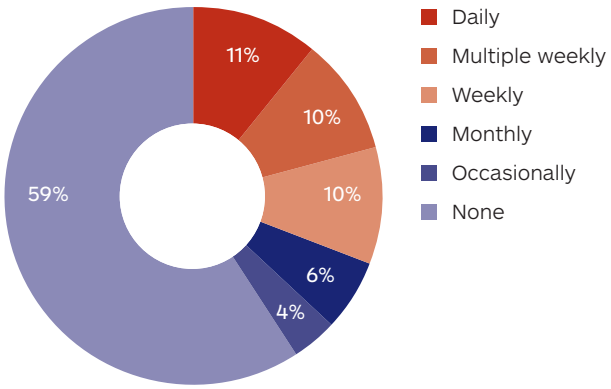
> I don't know, it's kinda, it's four days till dole day, and you want to... you go and steal something and swap it to [sic] the drug dealer for a tinnie. Stuff like that. That's what I used to do quite often. I was that f**kin' sad, I stole my brother's chainsaw and swapped it for dope. Stuff like that, that's pretty bad if you ask me.

[20] This is as opposed to addiction, which appeared to be rare.

MARIJUANA USE - PRE PRISON



MARIJUANA USE - CONTEMPORARY



> Yeah, that's pretty much why [I offended]. Theft. Lots of theft, burglary, couple burglaries. Lots of theft and receiving. We used to break into cars, couple of houses, but mostly cars. We used to smoke [methamphetamine], run around all night. Stereos, sound, radar detectors, navigation systems. That's the thing with the drug too, we didn't really care, felt like superman on it.
>
> It eventually became an excuse, because I needed money to buy it. But it was mainly, it used to just mess up my head and my emotions, the way I was thinking. 17 years of pent up aggression towards everything that was going on in the world ended up just erupting, and I was pretty much constantly angry.

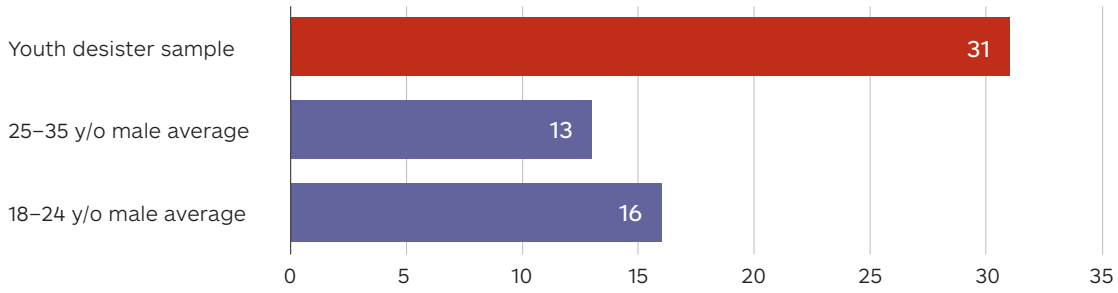
For nine of the 11 participants who reported a link between drugs and their offending, then, it was not a direct link (a conviction resulting from drug charges) but related to the indirect effects of drug use.

POST PRISON DRUG USE

At the time of interview, drug consumption among the cohort had changed dramatically.

The number of participants who used marijuana at least daily had declined by 79 percent at time of interview (n=29 to n=6), while those who abstained totally from the

USING CANNABIS AT LEAST WEEKLY - CONTEMPORARY



PERCENTAGE OF SAMPLE USING CANNABIS AT LEAST WEEKLY (MINISTRY OF HEALTH, 2010)

drug had increased by 172 percent (n=11 to n=30). Of those still using the drug, just one participant considered their use to be an ongoing problem.[21]

The use of hard drugs, too, had declined. Only two people reported using hard drugs at the time of interview, namely methamphetamine. One participant was using the drug weekly and the other monthly, but neither considered the use to be a problem.

Again, our sample is too small to draw conclusions about harder drugs, but despite the significant reduction in drug use, overall our cohort's cannabis use appears, on average, to remain heavier than we would expect from a random sample of the population. Between the ages of 25 and 34, 27.1 percent of the overall New Zealand male population report using cannabis in the last 12 months, with 13 percent having used it at least weekly (Ministry of Health, 2009). Of our cohort, more than double that, at 31 percent, reported the same level of use.

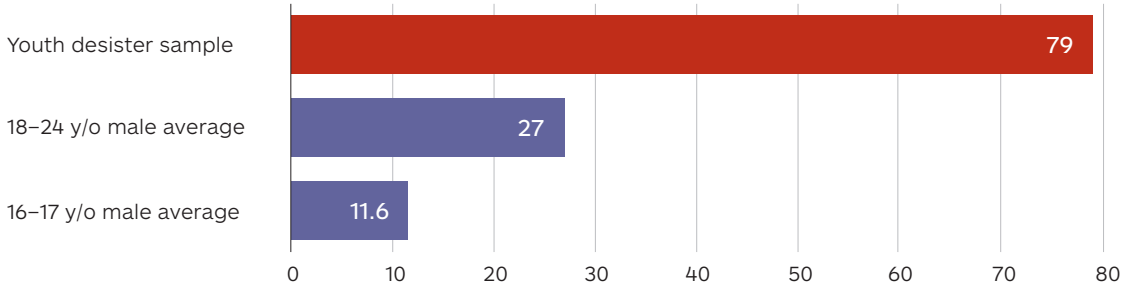
ALCOHOL: PRE-PRISON ALCOHOL USE

Alcohol was a major influence in the lives of many of our cohort. More than 84 percent (n=41) of the cohort reported they were getting drunk to intoxication at least occasionally in the lead up to or during their primary period of offending. As was the case with drug use, the research cohort appears significantly more likely to abuse alcohol than we would expect from a random sample of the population. Data show that of New Zealand males, 11.6 percent of those aged 16-17 and 27 percent of those aged 18-24 consume enough alcohol to 'feel drunk' at least weekly (Ministry of Health, 2010), whereas around 79 percent (n=41) of our male cohort reported doing so, including five who reported getting drunk daily.

Of those who had used alcohol during their offending, 42 percent (n=16) now considered it to have been a problem at that time, but only one reported that they believed it was a problem while they were actually offending. Seventeen of the 43 participants that used alcohol prior to incarceration linked alcohol use to their offending. For many, the impaired judgement and decreased inhibition caused by heavy drinking were key factors without which the transition into acts of significant criminality would never have occurred:

> I wouldn't [commit crime sober]. I don't have the courage. The other guys would. I get a bit edgy and paranoid. You don't care when you're half cut.

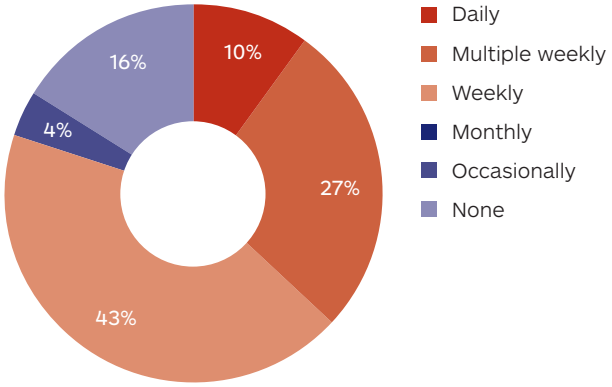
DRINKING ENOUGH TO FEEL DRUNK AT LEAST WEEKLY - PRE-PRISON



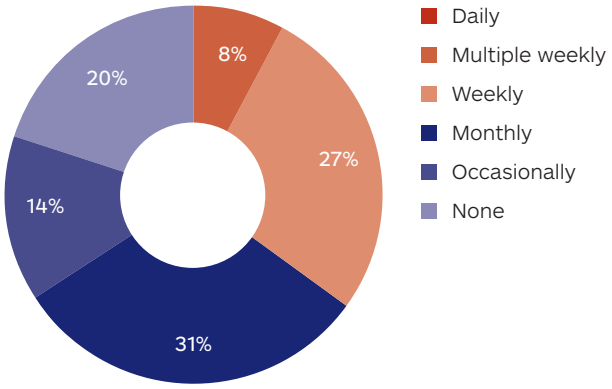
PERCENTAGE OF SAMPLE DRINKING UNTIL DRUNK WEEKLY (MINISTRY OF HEALTH, 2010)

[21] Being self-reported, it must be noted that this may not be a complete representation of problematic use.

ALCOHOL - PRE-PRISON



ALCOHOL - CONTEMPORARY



> I probably wouldn't have done it if I was just stoned. I think drinking was the major part. When we were drunk we were just idiots.
>
> I did [feel guilty]. Because you know I was brought up being taught what was right or wrong. But then when I was drinking that all fuzzed away. When I'm sober then of course. It was just when I was doing it, I didn't care because I was usually under the influence.

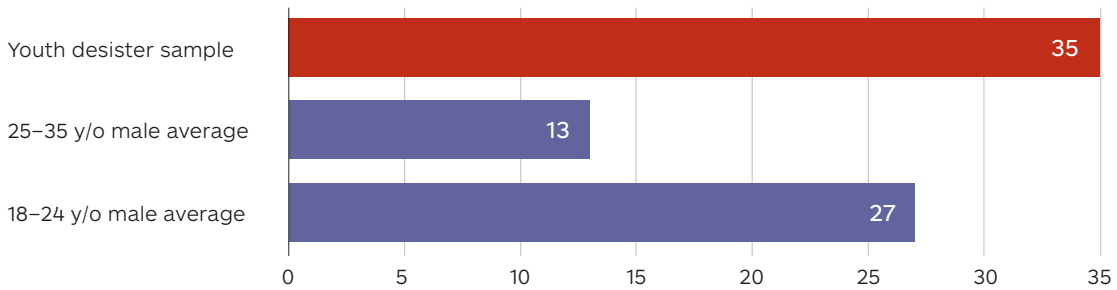
Alcohol, therefore, was linked to criminal behaviour by more participants than drugs were (n=17 and n=11, respectively).

POST PRISON ALCOHOL USE

As with drug use, participants reported a significant decrease in alcohol consumption to the point of intoxication in the period between offending and the point of interview. Daily intoxication dropped by 100 percent, while getting drunk weekly or multiple times weekly had dropped by 42 percent and 73 percent respectively. Only one participant reported that drinking was still a problem.

Notwithstanding these decreases in heavy drinking, the percentage of the cohort that is getting drunk at least weekly remains significantly above what we would expect generally. Data show that 13.0 percent of 25-35 year old New Zealand males consume enough to 'feel drunk' at least

DRINKING ENOUGH TO FEEL DRUNK AT LEAST WEEKLY - CONTEMPORARY



PERCENTAGE OF SAMPLE DRINKING UNTIL DRUNK WEEKLY (MINISTRY OF HEALTH, 2010)

weekly (Ministry of Health 2009), while our male cohort is almost three times that, at 35 percent.[22]

THE RELEVANCE OF DECREASING DRUG AND ALCOHOL USE

Given the significant changes in the cohort's alcohol and drug use between the period of criminality and the time of interview, it might be expected that participants would link these changes to their desistance. This was not the case. In fact the relationship between drug and alcohol use and desistance was highly nuanced. For a minority, reducing drug and/or alcohol use was important in their desistance process, but for most it was not seen as related.

For 27 percent (n=14) of the cohort, changing their use of alcohol or drugs was reported as an important component of changing their lives and avoiding crime. For this group, the change in use was reported as hard-won but crucial:

> No, I think if I'd not quit the drugs, I would have ended up back doing crime.

> I'd be lucky to drink six cans a week. I'm not drinking to get drunk. If my work mates pop round and say, should we have a few drinks, I might have half a dozen or so. That's why I normally only buy a 12 pack, cause I normally have a mate to drink the other six. I do try my hardest to stay out of the situations where I am going to be tempted. It is hard. It's f**kin' hard, man.

For many, prison was a key motivator for this change. As discussed in Section 5, prison generally provided a period of reflection for many of our cohort, but it was also valuable as a place of forced sobriety. Total abstinence rarely carried on after prison, but release often marked the beginning of less harmful drug- and alcohol-use patterns.

For the majority of those who had changed their drug and alcohol use patterns, however, change was reported more as a reflection of shifts in their behaviours and lifestyles than as part of the desistance process itself.

For the majority of those who had changed their drug and alcohol use patterns, however, change was reported more as a reflection of shifts in their behaviours and lifestyles than as part of the desistance process itself. This is true even of the heaviest of drug and alcohol users.

Of those participants who were using marijuana at least daily pre-prison (n=28), 34 percent (n=10) linked their reduction in drug use to desistance, but almost twice as many (n=19) reported no link. Alcohol showed a nearly identical trend. Of those participants who were previously getting drunk multiple times per week or daily (n=20), 35 percent (n=7) indicated decreasing alcohol intake as a factor in desistance, whereas 65 percent (n=13) reported no link.

Many participants whose desistance was not linked to alcohol and drug use reduction reported using heavily (at pre-prison levels or above) after leaving prison, but subsequently slowed down as life circumstances changed. Often this change involved new partners, children, or work demands. In these cases, ongoing change was tied to maturity and increasing responsibilities as parents and breadwinners:

> Now we're getting older as well, a lot of the ones that are still bad eggs are still going out to town every weekend and [drinking heavily], whereas all my good friends that I hang out with now, they're settling down, everyone owns their own house, like a

[22] Of note, these drinking patterns are more in line with those shown by the 18-24 year old demographic, for which 27 percent of males reported drinking at least weekly. Although only 14 percent (n=7) of our cohort were within this age bracket (aged 23 and 24) it may be arguable that over time the cohort's habits will drift further toward the norm.

> couple of our friends have just had babies and stuff, so everyone's settling down with kids. So what we do for fun now is we go bowling, we take the kids bowling, [laughs] and go out for dinner and have a few beers. Last week we went f**king ice skating and shit like that.
>
> The alcohol, I think it was partly a conscious decision thinking "hey, this isn't really good", and then with everything else, life moving on, you just drop it eventually.

In such cases, the changes in drug and alcohol use have tentative links to desistance at best and appear more as part of maturing into later adulthood. In short, most participants maintained high levels of drug and alcohol intake for periods after prison (a period in which desistance was occurring) but this use decreased naturally as they grew older.

This does not, however, mean there were no changes in immediate post-prison drug/alcohol behaviour. With perhaps just one or two exceptions, those who continued heavy use made adjustments that avoided the associations and situations that might lead to crime. Substance use was therefore decoupled from criminality, allowing it to continue without significantly threatening desistance. Although some acknowledged an element of risk here, the risk was reported as manageable:

> I still smoke pot but I don't smoke when I am drinking. You know I don't smoke pot all day everyday… Just keep my distance away from the police. I could still live my life as to how it was before. I was not really bad before really. I just got smarter not to push it that much further.
>
> It's different, when you grow up you're not as stupid when you drink as you were when you were younger.
>
> I guess it was the people that I was drinking and smoking with, like my uncles and cousins, when I got out I was drinking and smoking with. Before I went to prison I was drinking with mates.

At the point of interview, the narrative around alcohol and drug use had changed from what it was pre-incarceration. Marijuana smokers best represent this. Whereas the drug was previously seen as a significant problem, it was now framed very differently. Regular smokers of marijuana reported that it is now a tool for relaxation which they believe helps, rather than hinders, their non-criminal lives:

> I just like it for my downtime, I'll get home [from work] and I'm wide awake, so by the time I have a shower and unwind, I usually turn to having a joint, it relaxes me and puts me to sleep.
>
> [If] I really need to focus on work I won't. But it's really good man, after doing a hard day's work you can just relax and go to sleep so easy. If I didn't smoke pot and had a real stressful day I'd be thinking about work or arguments or my son… it just helps me out, it's real good, eh.

CONCLUSION

Drug and alcohol abuse was high among the cohort leading up to their offending, and while it had dropped significantly by point of interview, it remained considerably higher than that of the population generally. For some participants reducing or ceasing drug and alcohol use was crucial to desisting, but for many more the connection did not exist. For others, the context of their use was important: although they continued to use drugs and alcohol, changes to the people with whom this use occurred were reported as being more important than changes to the use itself. Even when alcohol and drug use did subside, it was often not reported to be related to changes in criminality but a natural response to maturation and related life changes. In this way most shifts in drug and alcohol use were reflections, rather than causes, of wider change. Reducing alcohol and drug intake may be vital for some people in order for them to desist from offending, but findings suggest that abstinence, or even in many instances a reduction in heavy alcohol and drug use, is not necessarily incompatible with successful desistance.

10. CHANGING PEER GROUPS

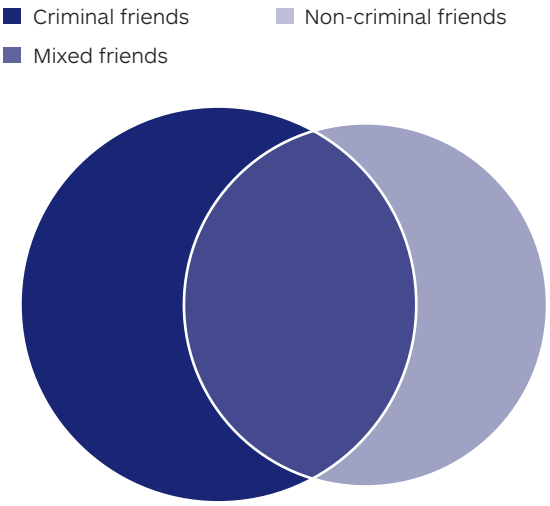
Antisocial peer groups are an important and powerful risk factor in the onset of offending (Farrington, 1992). Affiliations with antisocial or substance abusing groups can lead to offending among those with previously untroubled life histories (Bassarath, 2001). Particularly among youth with fewer overall risk factors, antisocial peer groups can be very influential (Moffitt, 1993). Just as peer groups can steer young people "off course", they can also work to inhibit or derail desistance from crime. This section looks at the significance of peer groups on offending and the importance of breaking negative peer associations among the cohort.

CRIMINAL ASSOCIATIONS

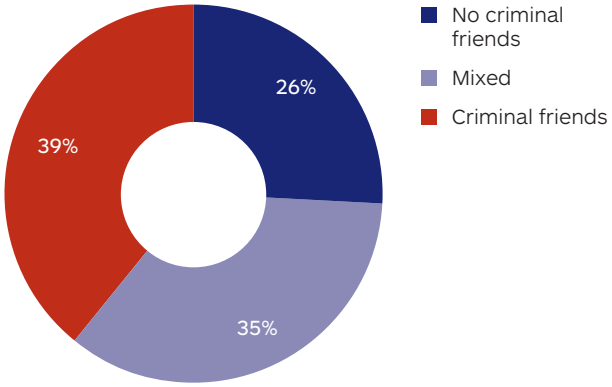
As was noted in Section 6, the vast majority of our cohort was prepared to accept responsibility for offending, but this did not mean they were oblivious to external influences. In Section 9 it was noted that many drug takers identified drug use as a problem because drugs were often linked to criminal associations, and these peer associations were part of a widely recognised issue for our cohort:

> I was hanging out with really bad people that were quite, they really influenced you to... they made it look real cool, you were a hard man, that sort of bullshit...I wouldn't just go and do it on my own accord, I'd only do it with these two guys...
>
> Yeah, like someone thinks up something and it's pretty easy to do and they just push it and push it. These guys were a lot older than me, like I was only 17 and the next guy up was probably about 29... there was probably a big age difference between

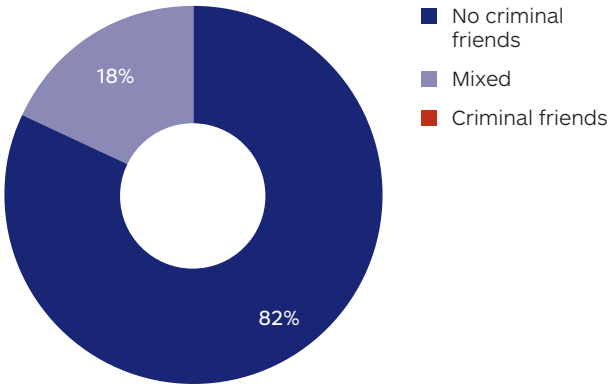
PARTICIPANT FRIENDSHIP GROUPS PRE-PRISON



FRIENDSHIP GROUPS PRE-PRISON



FRIENDSHIP GROUPS AT TIME OF INTERVIEW



> us.... I was always the one going I don't know, man, really dogs me out a bit, but in the end they'd talk me into it because I was the only one with a car.

Pre-offending peer groups or friendships in our group can be broken into three categories: criminal only; both criminal and non-criminal; and non-criminal only. Of the cohort, 39 percent (n=20) reported having exclusively criminal friends, 25 percent (n=13) exclusively non-criminal friends, and 35 percent (n=18) reported having a mix of both. In total, then, 76 percent (n=38) of the cohort had criminal peer groups.

When participants had a mix of criminal and non-criminal friends the criminals tended to become the primary peer group:

> I had two types of crowds to hang out with; one was as I would have classed them in those days, was the goody-goods. And then there's the other crowd I was hanging out with which was the crime side of it.

> At first we did, but in the end it was everyone just doing the bad shit, smoking the crap. [In the end] it was all just the drug mates together. You'd see them [non-drug friends] walking round, but...

Although few appreciated it at the time, the negative influences were eventually recognised as one of the primary drivers of their offending, and later as inhibitors to successful desistance. This recognition is reflected in the deliberate efforts that were made to break away from criminal peer groups.

BREAKING ASSOCIATIONS

For the majority of the cohort, and overwhelmingly for those with criminal associations, breaking peer associations was an important step in desisting from crime. Often this began on release from prison.

Some 63 percent (n=32) of the cohort said that they had to break friendship associations in order to desist from crime. This represents 84 percent of those who

had any criminal associations (n=38). A further four said that the behaviour of their criminal friends also changed over time, meaning that both the participants and their friends gave up crime.

> I've had to break contact with everyone man. That's when I took off [to another city]. That's the only time I've ever been able to just get back to my normal self, sort of thing.

> Well I moved out of the neighbourhood, to break the whole cycle. I guess that kinda saved me. I was just getting up to mischief.

The need to change peer groups was not exclusive to criminal associations, however. A small number of participants noted that they had changed peer groups not because of their criminality *per se*, but because they wanted to move away from heavy drinking or drug taking friendships:

> There's one person there that I used to hang out with that I'd get dragged back there, but it's sort of a situation where if I'd had a shit week or had something going on, then to blow off some steam I'd go and get drunk. And then I'd always end up taking drugs... I'm just easily influenced. I'd make shit decisions. But then I cut him off... I haven't been back there for a year.

The significance of these changes is made clear in the dramatic changes in makeup of peer groups that took place since incarceration.

At the time of interview, no participants maintained criminal-only peer groups. Even those who had exclusively criminal friends prior and did not deliberately break associations now maintain some non-criminal associations. Those with significant criminal associations were still few in number: just 18 percent (n=9) of the cohort. The remainder, more than 82 percent (n=42), maintain no criminal associations[23] at all.

For the majority of the cohort, and overwhelmingly for those with criminal associations, breaking peer associations was an important step in desisting from crime.

Those who did not break criminal associations were often faced with peer pressure from their old associates, although most shrugged off the pressure, asserting that their change toward a crime-free lifestyle was strong enough to withstand any challenge:

> Nah, I could be mates with any of them, could still be as tight with them as I was after jail, it all comes down to me and my decisions really.

What did not occur consciously, however, tended to occur with maturity, and a slow realisation of having less in common with criminal friends than non-criminal ones occurred. Whether consciously or unconsciously, breaking antisocial peer groups tended to have a snowballing positive effect whereby the vacuum created by losing antisocial friends was filled by pro-social associations that in turn solidified and supported the desistance process.

CONCLUSION

The importance of changes in peer associations, primarily those consciously undertaken, is another overwhelming finding, joining the importance of post-prison support, as being vital to the desistance process of most. Indeed, recognising breaking negative associations as a necessary precondition to desistance is among the clearest findings of this research.

[23] Criminal associations were defined as active friendships with those actively engaged in criminal behavior, excluding personal drug use and driving offences. Facebook 'friends' and friends with very rare contact were excluded.

11. PRO-SOCIAL LIVES

At the point of interview, all of the participants reported living very different lives compared to the pre-incarceration period. Given that the cohort is made up of people imprisoned at a young age this is perhaps unsurprising, but for our participants the development of a meaningful pro-social identity was an important element of ongoing change and supporting desistance. By making life changes and positively existing within the community, participants were able to make the long-term transition away from the negative identity that had been developed by their offending and incarceration.

This has been identified in previous research as being important to the desistance process (Carpenter, 2012), and could be seen to manifest itself among our cohort in a range of ways, many of which were subtle and not readily quantifiable. This section outlines two areas that exemplified this above all others: the first is employment and the second is the gaining of a partner and children. It concludes by highlighting the different paths to a pro-social life.

EMPLOYMENT

There is a general consensus that stable employment promotes desistance from crime (Kazemian & Maruna, 2009). Employment is desirable because it provides a regular source of income but also because of the social-psychological benefits that are derived from work.

The differences in employment status of our cohort pre- and post-incarceration are significant. Before their imprisonment 46

percent of participants were engaged full-time, with 14 percent (n=7) in school and 32 percent (n=16) employed full-time. A further 10 percent (n=5) were in part-time employment[24] and 47 percent (n=23) were unemployed.

At the time of interview, this situation had changed significantly, with 88 percent (n=45) employed or having had a history of ongoing employment. This is despite the fact that 35 percent (n=18) reported that having been to prison made finding employment difficult:

> It's close to impossible [to find work], yeah. Just because everyone's looking for non-criminal employees, eh. I was young and stupid, I've been clean for five years and that still doesn't matter. When I was 15 I did it, and now I'm 23 they're still judging me.

> A couple of jobs – for instance, one up in Wellington, it was actually a McDonald's job, and I was applying for it. Well, we were both laughing, both laughing, and chatting away, and they got to my criminal history, and I told them about it and I saw his face change completely, and then never heard back from them.

Many also found that although they were able to get jobs relatively quickly, they were limited to certain fields such as manual labour and the service industry:

> Yeah when I first got out [it was hard] because, yeah, I just got like a business manager degree and so thought I'd start going for those types of jobs and then just got no's straight away. And then ended back up doing physical labour and then ended up back in forestry again.

> Nah. I'm doing construction, I'm doing building, most everyone on a construction site's been to jail. I tick it.

These problems were mitigated for five of the cohort who had friends or family who were able to find them employment, and a further seven who simply denied having a criminal history in order to gain work:

> After the first couple of weeks it's pretty disheartening. But one of my friends managed to get me a job, because they were reasonably high up in the chain, and they put their job on the line pretty much by vouching for me.

> My dad actually owns a painting business, and he said if you want a job, just come to work. I didn't have to worry about anything financially.

> I don't mention it. My boss never asked me to, if he asked me to I'd tell him. It was years ago, people do change, you know.

More than three quarters (n=39) of the cohort were able to secure employment quickly after their release – either immediately or within two to three months (many were unable to be clear about the length of time involved). Finding work was a priority for most and for many it was crucial in helping them to desist from crime:

> Just keeping me busy, I'm earning money, getting ahead in life, getting savings, I'm able to get anything I want, really. At the drop of a hat, like five hundred, if I want a bottle of piss or some rims for my car or some clothes, I can get it, I've got money and it's all hard earned money.

> I think because I'm employed now and making money legitimately those sorts of [criminal] thoughts don't occur.

Some 61 percent (n=31) of participants reported that work was an important element in their desistance from crime. Furthermore, there were high levels of job satisfaction among the cohort with 73 percent (n=37) saying that their work was either rewarding or highly rewarding, and work for many meant a chance to create new, pro-social friendships and develop a stable lifestyle. This supports research that has identified that those in more subjectively rewarding jobs tend to be less involved in crime, and non-financial aspects of work are important in decisions not to re-offend (Wadsworth, 2006).

[24] Six of the seven participants who were attending school were also working part-time.

To simply equate work with desistance, however, might be misleading. McIvor, Jamieson and Murray (2000) found that young offenders made proactive decisions to stop offending irrespective of whether they were employed or whether there were other positive incentives. And certainly for many participants of this research the decision to desist was already instilled by the time work had been found. Many were unequivocal in stating that even if they lost their employment they would not return to crime, and some reported that they had maintained desistance during periods of unemployment. Work, therefore, for some at least, may be seen as an important element of "good lives" but not crucial to desistance. This is not to downplay the importance of employment for many in desisting, but to put it in a broader context. This argument is perhaps even clearer in relation to the gaining of a partner or having children.

PARTNERS AND CHILDREN

Like changes to employment, there are significant changes in the relationship and parental status of the cohort pre- and post-prison. Just 6 percent (n=3) of participants reported that they were in serious relationships before going to prison, but at the time of interview 59 percent (n=30) were, or had been, in a serious long-term relationship. Only one participant had a child before their incarceration, but 57 percent (n=29) had children at the time of interview.

Desistance literature has traditionally equated relationships with desistance by emphasising its stabilising influences (Maruna, 2001). This is because such relationships lead to increased time spent with a spouse, which may disrupt and dissolve relationships with friends or accomplices (Warr, 2002). Notably, however, this literature generally concerns adult rather than youth desisters.

Of our cohort, those in relationships and/or with children overwhelmingly credited their partners and/or their children as being important to desisting from crime:

> Without them I'd be in jail. Yeah. I'll be honest about that.

> Yeah I think so. Being with her and doing normal stuff like going to the movies and stuff like that. Just another lifestyle, someone else.

> Oh yeah, nah, there's no way I could be away from [my children]. I've been away from them twice maybe in the whole time they've been around.

> Yeah it definitely changed my whole life mate, as soon as I... even just meeting my fiancée, that changed my life, and as soon as I had my son, it's definitely changed in myself, changed me into a different person to be honest.

Despite what was said, however, the causative link between partners, children and desistance remains unclear. Nearly half of the cohort has not had a serious relationship or children, meaning their initial desistance is not linked to either. Furthermore, as will be recalled from Section 7, just four people relied on a partner on their immediate release from prison[25]. Most relationships, then, were formed after release; often after a period of years. Notably both of our cohort's female participants found partners to be essential catalysts for their desistance, both as positive influences and sources of support. With a sample of only two, however, it is unclear whether this is representative of any wider pattern, although it does match international findings (Sapouna, Bisset, & Conlong, 2011, pp. 4,5). Similarly, there was a lag – most often a substantial one – between leaving prison and having children. Moreover, many relationships did not survive, and this did not lead to a return to criminal offending in any case but one. In this way,

[25] Three of these participants were in relationships before prison, and one appears to have entered a serious relationship very early after release.

for the majority, partners and children confirm rather than instil a desire not to go back to prison. It is possible, perhaps likely, that partners reduce the risk of re-offending, but it is impossible to assess exactly by how much.

BUILDING A PRO-SOCIAL LIFE

Although all of our participants had undergone significant life change and can be seen, in varying degrees, to have established what we might call a pro-social life for themselves, represented by satisfaction in partners, children, employment or other means, it must be acknowledged that building this life was much easier for some than others.

For our low-end outliers, for example, little change was required: they already had the cultural capital needed to build a positive and socially 'normal' life, and so needed only to pick up where they had left off before their lives took a diversion into prison. For others, including our high-end outliers, the path to a pro-social life was a more arduous journey, and it was something that a few were still struggling with even at the time of interview. For those whose lives had been dominated by criminality, establishing legitimacy meant far greater changes. With regard to establishing employment, for example, all of the low-end outliers achieved high school qualifications before prison, but only two high-end outliers did. Where ten of the low-end outliers were working and four were in school before their imprisonment, only six of the high-end outliers were working and none were in school.

Moreover, for the participants who did not have existing familial or friendship ties to legitimate industry, the impediment of having to disclose their criminal history to potential employers posed a much greater hurdle. Similarly, where pressure to 'go straight' was exerted on those with stable families and upbringings through positive shaming, those with more dysfunctional families were denied the influence of a key trigger for desistance.

In this way, we saw in our participants a wide range of experiences with regard to building a pro-social life, and they correlated strongly with the concentrations of predisposing factors found in their backgrounds. Those whose lives had featured the most hardship in youth faced a similar hardship in establishing a pro-social identity to maintain their desistance.

CONCLUSION

The fact that so many participants gained work shortly after release cannot be ignored. This was most often reflective of the fact that these people were starting new lives, and for many this meant turning away from a criminal lifestyle. But it appears that work was as much a marker of this change as it was an influence on desisting. Many participants were quite clear that the changes in their behaviours predated employment. While work kept them occupied, focused, and introduced them to new sets of friends and influences, the decision to desist for most was by then already entrenched. What we cannot ascertain for those with employment histories is the impact that long-term unemployment might have had after release. We do know, however, that six of our cohort have had little or no employment since release, but only one of these is still offending, and only intermittently. Similarly, many participants credited a partner or children in being important to desistance, but given the lag between release and the commencement of relationships and having children, causation is far from clear. Even more than employment, having partners and children appears to confirm in our participants the establishment of a pro-social identity. That is, these elements are a supporting component of, rather than an influence on, post-conviction shifts in behaviour.

12. DISCUSSION

The objectives of this report were to examine a group of people who had served a sentence of incarceration before they were 20 years of age and were assessed at the time as having medium- to high risks of re-imprisonment, but who had not been convicted of a corrections-managed sentence since their release. The goal was to identify the factors that influenced this move away from criminality.

This report has been divided into topic areas for ease of discussion, but the various segments should not be seen in isolation. This final section will draw the different strands of the report into a coherent narrative.

Notable among many of the participants of the study was a distinct lack of reflexivity as to how they had moved from offending to desistance. Few could give clear unprompted reasons or understandings about the process. Desistance was framed as the way life naturally unfolded, and many had given it little or no thought beyond that. When asked what might be done to help others in their situation, for example, few were able to offer any coherent advice. For many, this lack of reflection appeared to be the consequence of criminality being regarded as simply a 'blip' in their lives, best forgotten or unworthy of great attention.

When criminality occurs in youth it can easily be written off as 'a passing phase', which quickly fades in the memory. For our cohort, the time of offending averaged around two-and-a half teenaged years. Five or ten years after offending, those years seemed distant and foreign to our subjects. A short period of criminality can therefore be easily written off as a youthful folly – a rationalisation not available to older desisters whose offending constituted a longer period and a greater portion of their lives.

While ostensibly this was a cohort of desisters, there was variety within the sample. Life, for some participants, had been hard and desistance had required metamorphic change that included many or all of the factors discussed in this report. Desistance in these cases was often a lengthy and difficult process. For others, offending was an anomaly in

an often largely untroubled upbringing, and desistance was not perceived as particularly difficult.

Without a control sample of persistent offenders, it is not possible to assess objectively the backgrounds of our cohort or what they mean for offending or desistance. Nevertheless, those within the cohort who reported multiple predisposing factors were more likely to face significant hurdles in the desistance process. We also hypothesise that overall, the cohort faced fewer life hardships than we might expect from a similar cohort of persisters, and thus may not be typical of young (persistent) offenders generally. It is possible that personal history is as important in desistance as individual actions post-conviction.

Among the cohort, the decision to desist occurred in two ways – as a deliberate decision or as a longer subconscious process. Both led to a 'switch' in thinking, which appears to be fundamental to desistance. Either way it happened there were two enablers at work: triggers of desistance and supporting factors. Triggers acted as motivators of change, whereas supporting factors aided change to occur. While most influences could clearly be seen as either triggers or support mechanisms, some showed elements of both.

The first significant trigger was arrest and imprisonment. The vast majority of the cohort's decisions to desist were made before conviction or once in prison, which itself opened the door for other triggers to operate. A significant component lay in the deterrent effect of imprisonment, involving a combination of fear, boredom, and a perception of not fitting into the criminal world. Deterrence was important, but often it was not the greatest trigger for desistance.

A further trigger that occurred early in the change process was guilt at having disappointed one's parents. This was a powerful trigger of what Braithwaite (1989) calls 'reintegrative shaming' that for many was the pivot upon which desistance depended. Another factor was recognising the impact that crimes had on victims. A lack of empathy for victims was a key pre-arrest element among the cohort and often this changed after being arrested and charged. A final factor was that participants tended to see themselves as different from others in prison – the *real* criminals with whom they had little in common. This perhaps speaks to the makeup of our sample of desisters.

All of the above factors acted as triggers for changes that usually commenced very quickly and continued throughout the period of incarceration. For a few within our cohort, however, the change process was slower and less conscious.

The second group of factors in desistance were what can be seen as 'supporting' factors. Once a prison sentence had commenced, the first elements that could provide support to the desistance decision were programmes or courses in prison, followed by probation support upon release. Although some programmes were seen as valuable, probation was only credited to the desistance process in a few cases.

Of far greater importance upon release – crucial, in fact, as a supporting factor to desistance – was post-release support, which was primarily provided by family. Such support in this transitional period was critical in providing both practical and emotional assistance.

Here we see the important role of family for our cohort. Through reintegrative shaming, family provided a key trigger to desistance, and also acted as the most frequently reported source of support. This dual role was unique, and highlights the importance of positive family relationships, as well as, perhaps, the specific nature of our sample.

In the rare instances that family did not provide post-release support, friends filled this role, although often to a lesser extent.

Post-release support worked not just in providing positive direction to the lives of participants, but also by buffering them from antisocial influences. Indeed, for

much of our cohort, here was the nexus of change: breaking associations with criminal friends also meant separating themselves from associated peer pressure. Above all else, post-release support and the breaking of associations were the most powerful factors in desistance.

While short-term post-release support was clearly vital to facilitating the decision to desist, longer-term elements were also in evidence.

One element that many credited as important to desistance was the support of partners and/or the responsibilities of parenthood. These factors were not present when the steps toward change were made, however, and thus can be seen as corroborative rather than causative. Having a partner and children tended to be a facilitator to maintaining a pro-social identity. Families and children provided stability, impetus and a sense of responsibility within our subjects and strengthened commitments to desistance. Significantly, however, only one of our subjects returned to crime when a relationship failed: the commitment to desist was already embedded within them – the 'switch' had occurred.

One element that had assisted the maintenance of desistance was changes in patterns of alcohol and drug use. For many, reducing or stopping the use of alcohol and drugs was important to desistance, although for others it appears to have occurred simply as a part of natural maturation and changes in lifestyle. Nonetheless, the sample generally continued to drink and use drugs at a higher level than one would find within the general population, without apparent deleterious effect. We must note here, however, that during the offending period none of our sample reported having acute addiction problems. If they had, we believe that cessation would have been critical to the desistance process.

Employment was another area that seemed to combine elements of desistance and the creation of a pro-social identity. Indeed, a commitment to work was one characteristic that united them. Although the connections between desistance and work appeared to be more loosely tethered than one might expect, they create a very significant bridge between desistance and the adoption of a pro-social lifestyle.

While this research has highlighted rather than unravelled the complexity of youth desistance, it nevertheless has illuminated some of its important elements. It has become clear that offender backgrounds and a positive post-release environment are of critical importance in the desistance process. For this reason the path to a crime-free, pro-social lifestyle has far fewer obstacles for some than it has for others. Allied to this is the fact that the development of a sense of personal agency is also easier for some than for others. Not only must an offender be able to imagine what changes are required and what those changes involve, they must also understand how lasting changes can be made. Having had, for example, a stable upbringing and the existence of practical and emotional post release support, some of our participants reported a relatively untroubled desistance process. For other of our participants, however, these factors were absent. Chaotic and abusive family backgrounds leading to a lack of cultural capital and other practical hurdles made for an uphill battle for the young offender intent on creating lasting change.

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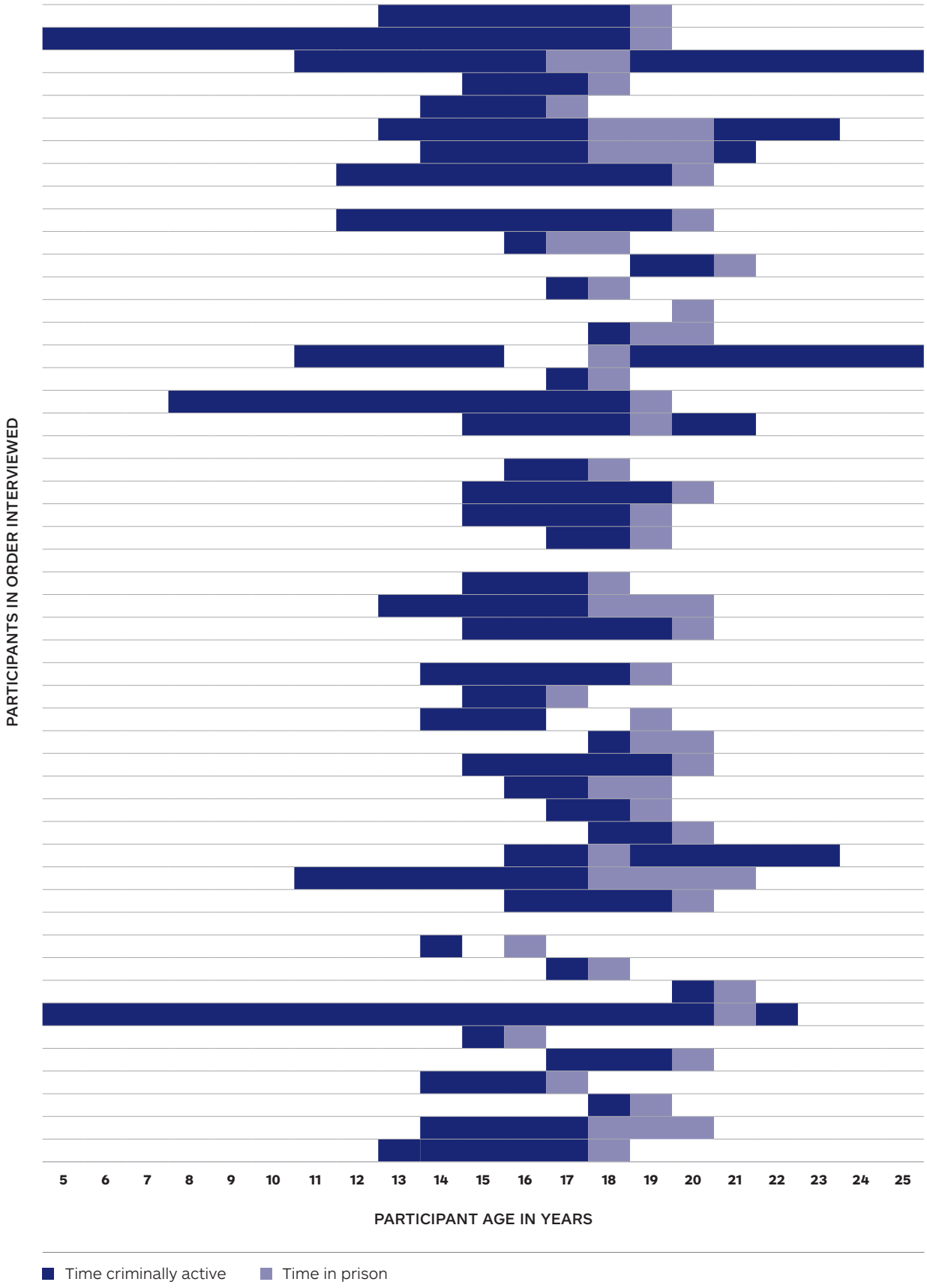
APPENDICES

APPENDIX A - A TIMELINE FROM CRIME TO FINAL DESISTANCE



APPENDIX B -
GEOGRAPHIC SPREAD OF PARTICIPANTS AT TIME OF OFFENDING