

## FINAL REPORT

**Award:** 2019-R2-CX-0032

**Title:** Mechanisms Underlying Desistance from Crime: Individual and Social Pathways

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**Project period:** 01/01/2020 – 12/31/2022

**Award amount:** \$797,079

## Summary of the project

Researchers have advanced the study of desistance by documenting the importance of prosocial events, such as marriage and employment. Other scholars have highlighted the importance of individual's internal shifts in motivation to change. Although these two lines of research have provided basic knowledge of desistance processes, our understanding of social and individual level mechanisms underlying successful and sustained criminal desistance remains markedly incomplete. Our goal is to conduct a mixed-method project that will provide a new level of specificity about mechanisms driving successful criminal desistance. The analyses based on the existing six waves of the Toledo Adolescent Relationships Study (n=1,321) covers over an 18-year time span allowing a long follow-up period which include key objective and subjective indicators of desistance along with multiple measures of individual and social factors among a demographically diverse sample. We propose conducting desistance narratives with a subset of male and female respondents who have evidenced a pattern of sustained criminal desistance. To serve as a contrast we will interview individuals who have persistence in criminal activity (n = 25) and those who have a pattern of intermittent criminal activity (n = 25). We operationalize desistance in multiple ways including self-reported criminal activity, criminal justice experience and problem substance use as well as relies on official criminal justice record data. Family networks are often sources of emotional and instrumental support for individuals seeking behavioral change. Thus, we will also interview a subset of parents (n = 25) and spouses/cohabiting partners (n = 25) to assess their role and perspectives on what helps and what hinders successful desistance. These qualitative interviews will form the basis for a new desistance survey module to be completed by all respondents who engaged in earlier criminal/delinquent behavior (n = 578). Our goal is to incorporate insights from the narratives as well as contemporary theorizing to

systematically distinguish individuals who persisted, desisted, and were intermittently involved in criminal activity. The TARS allows us to focus on the gendered differences and similarities in the role of individual and social factors. The analyses of the existing data and the planned data collection effort (e.g., desistance narratives and survey module) will allow us to move toward greater specificity relative to prior research about objective and subjective foundations of desistance. These findings will allow us to more fully inform criminal justice policy priorities and assist in the design of more effective intervention efforts.

### ***Major goals and objectives***

Our goal was to conduct a mixed-method project that would provide a new level of specificity about mechanisms driving successful desistance. Analyses will include longitudinal assessments based on eight waves of data from the Toledo Adolescent Relationships Study (TARS) (n = 1,321), which focuses on a demographically diverse sample, and covers over an 18-year time span (early adolescence through adulthood). To identify desistance mechanisms, key individual and social predictors were linked to self-report crime across the study period. The research design includes new in-depth interviews with a subset of respondents who have evidenced a pattern of sustained desistance, and to serve as a contrast, persisters and intermittent offenders (n = 50). We also interviewed a subset of romantic partners (n = 25) (spouses or cohabiting partners) and parents (n = 25) of these respondents who provided a unique perspective on desistance and on the role of these significant others. Building on our prior research (Giordano et al., 2002), these interviews, and recent theorizing about desistance, we developed a survey module completed by all individuals who engaged in delinquency or criminal behavior at early waves of the study (n = 403). We will determine whether provisional insights based on the in-depth interviews distinguish patterns across the sample.

The proposed mixed-method project was designed to develop our understanding of desistance processes in four key ways. First, the conceptual framework, measurement protocols, and analyses center on the role of *social and individual factors within the context of the same study design*. The analyses permit us to test hypotheses about the relative weight of social and individual factors linked to successful desistance. Aligning with a symbolic interactionist perspective (Farrall & Calverley, 2005; Giordano et al., 2002; Massoglia & Uggen, 2010) we identify ways in which these social and individual-level changes are linked and reciprocally related. Second, building on a longitudinal investigation that includes seven existing waves of survey and in-depth interview data with men and women and spans the periods from adolescence to adulthood (mean age at wave 6 is 32). This includes *sufficient years post-adolescence* to distinguish from other early starting delinquents those men and women who have exhibited a pattern of *sustained* desistance. Analyses operationalize desistance in multiple ways and assess pathways for different forms of criminal behavior. Third, analyses of existing data and a new data collection effort (in-depth interviews) allow us to move toward *greater specificity* relative to previous research about individual and social foundations of successful behavior change. Fourth, our prior research on women's desistance (Giordano et al., 2002, 2006, 2011) and the TARS inclusion of relatively equal numbers of men and women provide a basis for extending knowledge about the universal and uniquely gendered aspects of desistance. The in-depth interviews and desistance module will be especially critical for identifying distinctively gendered processes.

### ***Research questions***

**Aim 1: Identify Individual-Level Factors Linked to Sustained Desistance.** Researchers have identified general stages associated with behavior change (e.g., Prochaska et al., 1992). Yet a key aim of the proposed research was to identify specific changes in attitudes, perspectives, and

self-views that increase initial receptivity to changes in criminal behavior and sustain changes over the long haul. Our analyses leverage the seven waves of existing TARS data in growth curve models that document the role of individual-level changes (e.g., shifts in identity, changes in negative emotions) as influences on desistance as evidenced across eighteen years. The new data collection allows us to explore questions about four types of cognitive transformations associated with desistance, including details about specific ‘hooks for change’ (Giordano et al., 2002). We also probed for areas highlighted by desistance research, including individuals’ assessments of the relative significance of negative events/experiences (i.e., the crystallization of discontent) (Paternoster & Bushway, 2009), positive or hoped-for identities (Bachman et al., 2016; Johnston et al., 2019; Maruna, 2001), as well as the role of emotional changes (Giordano et al., 2007). The module allows us to examine individual-level changes in attitudes and perspectives across the full sample of desisters, persisters, and intermittent offenders.

**Aim 2: Examine Social Network Influences on Desistance Processes.** Theorizing about desistance often depicts the process of change as a highly personal accomplishment (Paternoster & Bushway, 2009). Yet the symbolic interactionist perspective suggests an important role of significant others as direct influences, and as they foster the individual-level changes in attitudes and perspectives associated with desistance. Relying on the full sample, we are currently completing growth curve analyses that allow us to systematically examine the influence of partner, peer, and family of origin relationships on reductions in crime in models that account for individual-level factors and other adult status characteristics (e.g., employment). TARS is ideal for these analyses as protocols administered at each wave include detailed assessments about relationships with and characteristics of romantic partners, peers, and the family of origin. While marriage is often the centerpiece of research on desistance, we contribute by: a) considering

















## **Demographic Characteristics**

With regard to basic demographic characteristics, women are more often in the desister category, consistent with prior research (Rodermond et al., 2016). Our study is a cohort design and the two groups are similar in age. It is important to note, however, that the age range is narrow, due to the original sample selection process. Persisters are slightly more likely to be Black compared to White, and Latino/as slightly more likely to be in the desister category, but the latter comparison is not statistically significant. A similar number of respondents have children across the two categories, underscoring that the presence of children itself is not an automatic route to movement away from crime. This contrasts with the narrative accounts, in which children are mentioned frequently as a ‘hook for change.’

Although a similar percentage of persisters and desisters are employed full-time, a significantly greater percentage of desisters have some college education. The structured survey instrument includes many additional questions about socioeconomic standing, both objective and subjective. Ongoing analyses of these factors, including level of debt and housing insecurities, should assist us in refining our understanding of the role of economic marginality versus greater social and economic resources in supporting a pattern of sustained desistance.

## **Relationship and Network Characteristics**

Recognizing that social factors have the potential to contribute to an understanding of desistance, we examined select focal indicators, as shown in Table 1. Table 1 shows a similar percentage of desisters and persisters are single, while a slightly higher percentage of desisters are married. Consistent with recent trends, a substantial minority of both persisters and desisters are currently cohabiting. This is not surprising as there exists an economic bar for marriage in the United States. Of particular interest, relative to these findings about union status, desisters scored

significantly higher on the index of relationship quality. This finding is consistent with Sampson and Laub's (2003) view of the good marriage effect. The causal ordering is not clear but suggests a prosocial process. Nevertheless, in concert with Paternoster and Bushway's (2009) focus on the avoidance of negatives, it is also important to note that, consistent with the mixed effects models described above, a higher percentage of desisters had avoided intimate partner violence within their romantic relationships. In addition, consistent with the emphasis of social learning theories, romantic partner criminal involvement differed across the two groups. We continue to analyze the nature of the romantic relationships to identify conditions under which these key adult relationships support the desistance process, and will present findings focused on these dynamic processes at the upcoming American Society of Criminology meetings.

### **Friends and Family Influences**

The romantic partner/spouse is clearly a key figure in the respondents' networks, as the findings in the table and qualitative analyses discussed below indicate, but affiliation with delinquent peers, even as an adult, is associated with persistence of criminal behavior or substance use problems. Recent analyses also showed that desisters were significantly more likely to describe their friends as having "settled down," "look out for my best interest," and to agree that they "help keep me from going down the wrong path." These findings are central to understanding the role of social others as they suggest that the broader lifestyle of friends appears to be salient, and that friends can play an active role in supporting and maintaining the desistance process through direct communications as well as modeling dynamics.

Finally, the qualitative data sensitized us to the importance of close-in ties with other family members, as they were frequently mentioned in their interviews as sources of influence. Analyses of survey responses indicate that persisters score higher than their more conforming counterparts

on the scale indexing criminal involvement/substance use of those in the respondent's immediate household. A second index of the criminal behavior/substance use of other family members outside the household is also significant, highlighting the need to develop broader conceptualizations of social context influences on offending patterns.

### **Individual-level Differences between Persisters and Desisters**

As shown in Table 1, at a basic level, desisters are significantly less likely to self-identify as 'troublemakers' relative to their persisting counterparts. However, it is also potentially important to note that desisters reported higher levels of self-confidence that they could continue to avoid 'trouble with the law.' This is potentially important, because the literature has often focused on generic personal traits/indicators such as self-control or self-esteem. Our view is consistent with the symbolic interactionist perspective emphasizing the multi-dimensional and situated aspects of the self. Accordingly, our prior research has shown, for example, that net of traditional factors such as self-esteem, condom use self-efficacy (belief that one could ask partner to or use a condom in specific situations) was significantly linked to later patterns of consistent use (Longmore et al., 2003). Similarly, we will be in a position to evaluate the long-term utility of this perception as we continue to monitor persistence and desistance in future waves of the TARS study.

In a recent preliminary analysis of other self-views, we developed a more complex portrait of negative and positive self-views and their relationship to persistence and desistance. In addition to the results of the troublemaker identity as shown in Table 1, ongoing analyses indicate that anger identity and being seen as a 'partier' were associated with persistence, net of a range of covariates. In contrast, across a number of different model specifications, positive identities (good parent, good provider, and good partner) were not linked to the odds of persistence and desistance. These results contrast with many treatments of self-based cognitive transformations, which have

generally emphasized the importance not only of discarding the negative aspects of the individual's views of self, but of establishing positive identity dimensions that are likely to sustain a long-term pattern of desistance. We do not observe gender differences in the association of identities and desistance, which suggests that the identities are a critical factor in the desistance process. We continue to analyze these data to illuminate further this pattern of results. One caveat is that the self-based items are "reflected appraisals" of others. That is, the questions tap how other people would describe the respondent, leaving open the possibility that internalized views contain more positive themes, but that desisters do not have confidence that others share this view of their positive selves.

## **IN-DEPTH INTERVIEW FINDINGS**

Collection and analyses of the qualitative interviews was completed during the project time period. This included 53 interviews with respondents, 25 with partners and 25 with parents. These data were useful in the design of the structured instrument and provided important insights about desistance processes. Examples relating to item development included several individual-level cognitive changes that were stressed by respondents and incorporated as new questions in the structured survey. Further, these results confirmed the importance of including items related to the role of parents and especially partners in desistance processes, and the role of the respondents themselves in agentic actions designed to change aspects of their relationships and social network ties.

A first step in the more systematic analyses of the in-depth interviews was to compare the perspectives of parents and partners with the views of respondents themselves, particularly about the extent of the respondents' desistance or persistence, and perceptions of factors associated with



these pathways. We created summaries of each set of interviews to assess the similarities and differences in perspectives within a given network of ties.

Some common themes emerged, but the romantic partners often provided a more critical assessment relative to the parent interviewed, and relative to the respondent's own assessment. Indeed, some parents either did not realize the extent of their child's involvement in substance use and criminal activity or were reluctant to share the full extent of their difficulties. However, parents had greater awareness of their child's problem behaviors as an adolescent and/or young adult, and thus some of the variability across interviews may have reflected the nature of their vantage points. For example, Theresa's mother admitted that this respondent had used drugs as a youth, but "cleaned up that part of her life" when she got pregnant and decided to have the child. This narrative is, however, consistent with Theresa's own interview in which she also mentions motherhood as a significant 'hook for change.' This case is also consistent with a trend toward blaming others for their own child's involvement in delinquency, drug use and the like. Theresa's mother noted that "she never even paid for it, people just gave it to her that she'd be hanging out with." Another respondent, Jessica's mother, reflected on her own daughter's changing behavior. She indicated that Jessica "made a lot of bad decisions and now she's trying to pull herself up." While this statement accords some responsibility to Jessica, she then quickly noted that she "hung around the wrong people" as part of the portrait, and at another point described Jessica as still having friends who are drug users and "drag her down." Her mother's assessment was actually consistent with the quantitative view of this respondent as an intermittent offender.

Parental support is not always consistent and is often contingent on their child's behavior. To illustrate, Theresa received an inheritance from her father, "blew" the first round of money, and

ended up homeless. And while Theresa's mother tried to help her manage the second installment more carefully, she is "on the way to blowing the second installment."

So I will help her when I see she's doing the right thing. As much as I can. Because she's my daughter. And I used to tell her. I don't like her as a person. Many, many times, because of the way she acts. I love her cuz she's my daughter, but I don't have to like the way she is. And she knows.

The above quote well illustrates the conflicting emotions she feels as a mother and provides a contingent statement (I will help her when she's doing the right thing). Nevertheless, a recent quantitative analysis using the existing seven waves of longitudinal data indicated that many parents continued to provide different forms of support to these individuals with 'problem' backgrounds. Indeed, results indicated that parents of respondents who reported criminal behavior actually received higher levels of financial but not emotional support, relative to more conforming adult children (Longmore et al., 2022). The new structured survey data include a comprehensive assessment of support provisions, and importantly, will provide important new information about how respondents understand and respond to this continuing support. For example, some individuals have noted conflict around the issue of support, highlighting that a straightforward "benefits of social support" framework belies the complexity of such exchanges, particularly when the child has a problem history. As another illustration of this complexity, Jake noted that his mother and sister (who live next door to one another) cared for his daughter during the time he was sent to jail. However, now that he was available and had stable housing, he wanted to be with his daughter as much as possible, and to make more decisions about her life. Instead, significant conflict had ensued within this family unit, and the high levels of anger and stress he expressed during the interview could, over the long haul, result in a return to drug use as a coping mechanism.

The interviews with partners provided another lens that is at once "close-in," but did not frequently include comprehensive knowledge of the respondent's life as a teen. Reflecting the

distinctive nature of this viewpoint, the partner respondents sometimes relied on, as Jeff put it, “stories from her past” to gauge the extent and nature of their desistance. Amber, Terri’s wife, developed a positive portrait of Terri’s changes, also relying on “stories,” and believes that Terri is “a very different person now,” noting that she “wants to go out way less,” and pointing to their son as a significant ‘hook for change.’ Similarly, Mary Ellen said she had heard stories of her partner Devon’s “hellish ways” as a teen but noted that even though he “likes to take charge and is a control freak” he has not been in trouble since they have been a couple. She credited her influence and his role as a father as factors associated with his ‘settling down.’

Consistent with recent trends in the literature that have emphasized the avoidance of negative self-appraisals (i.e., ‘the feared self’ notion in Paternoster & Bushway, 2009), and our own pattern of results, several of the narratives provide evidence that negative experiences or conceptions of a ‘feared self’ have been linked to desistance. For example, James decided to quit his involvement with drugs when his cousin died from a heroin overdose, and Liz indicated that she no longer partied as much because she didn’t want to be “that mom.” Similarly, several respondents, particularly but not exclusively women, mentioned receiving a home visit or other contact with child protective services as a catalyst for change. Danny’s narrative highlights the limitations of viewing such ‘hooks for change’ in isolation:

I’m not running with the same crowd. OK. There’s no underage drinkin. No drugs. I have more to lose now than I did back then. I couldn’t imagine losing my children over something. Doing something stupid. And I’ve surrounded myself with people that don’t break the law.

In this short narrative segment, Danny referenced negative peer influences, but also underscored the agentic aspect of this change (I’ve surrounded myself with people that don’t break the law). He also highlighted dynamics long emphasized by control theorists (too much to lose) (Laub & Sampson, 2003), but focused specifically on his children. In suggesting that he could not imagine

losing his children over something ‘stupid,’ it is clear that he could and has imagined it, suggesting a role for a ‘feared’ outcome that he would not like to even envision. Finally, he appears to have experienced a cognitive transformation about the nature and desirability of formerly enjoyed actions, which he now labeled ‘something stupid.’ Thus, it is likely that the presence of multiple positives and a strong understanding of potential negatives combined to establish a firm commitment to desistance.

## **NEXT STEPS**

Analyses of the qualitative and quantitative data collected in connection with this project continue, and draw on both ‘ways of knowing’ to illuminate dynamic processes that support or limit the individual’s desistance potential. While straightforward comparisons of the two groups (persisters and desisters) are an intuitive way to organize analyses, clearly greater nuance is required. For example, individuals in the persister subgroup were significantly more likely to agree that “they had gotten tired of all the hassles” associated with crime, and more often agreed that they had “stopped blaming other people for the trouble [they] got into.” These results underscore that cognitive transformations may have occurred even among those who have not yet reached a totally ‘conforming’ status. However, treatment programs that focus on changing thought processes as central to behavior change (i.e., *Thinking for a Change* (Bush et al., 1997)) likely need to focus on concrete social patterns (specific dimensions of partner quality, type of friends) and available economic and social capital, as well as these cognitive transformations (Copp et al., 2020; Giordano et al., 2003).

## **ARTIFACTS**

***List of products.***

Giordano, P. C., Copp, J. E., Manning, W. D., & Longmore, M. A. (2023). Relationship Dynamics and Desistance from Crime. Paper to be presented at the annual meeting of the American Society of Criminology, November, Philadelphia, PA.

Copp, J. E., Giordano, P.C., Manning, W. D., & Longmore, M. A. (2022). Desistance from criminal activity: Social learning approaches to unpacking the good marriage effect. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Society of Criminology, November, Atlanta, GA.

Giordano, P. C. (2022). Some cognitive transformations about the dynamics of desistance. *Criminology & Public Policy*, 21(4), 787-809. DOI: [10.1111/1745-9133.12609](https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-9133.12609)

Giordano, P. C., Longmore, M. A., & Manning, W. D. (Forthcoming). Toledo Adolescent Relationships Study (TARS): Wave 8. National Archive for Criminal Justice Data at Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research [distributor].

Longmore, M. A., Douthat, C. B., Manning, W. D., & Giordano, P. C. (2022). Links between adult children's persistence or desistance and parents' provision of emotional and instrumental support. Paper presented at the Stockholm Criminology Symposium, June, Stockholm.

### ***Data set***

Quantitative data (Giordano et al., forthcoming) was collected from individuals via a web-based survey. The survey was compiled using Sawtooth Software's SSI Web, and hosted by Sawtooth Software's SSL secure connection to ensure that all data passed between the web server and browsers remained private. Data is stored on a secure, dedicated server and backed up daily.

The final desistance module will be archived at NACJD. Direct identifiers have been removed and indirect identifiers have been recoded to minimize disclosure risk and prohibit re-

identification. Due to the rather small community-based sample we believe a restricted data access option at NACJD with limited and controlled access will provide the appropriate level of confidentiality to our respondents and minimize any risk of disclosure.

***Dissemination activities***

The data set collected as a result of this project is being archived at NACJD.

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