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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Do the reasons why people desist from crime vary by age, length of offending career or lifestyle factors?

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Abstract

Research into desistance from crime has progressed enormously in the past three decades. Despite this tremendous growth, some issues remain unexplored. Among these is the extent to which the reasons why people stop offending might vary by the age at which they stop, and their previous lifestyles. Herein we explore the extent to which the reasons why people desist are associated with their age, and the length and nature of their criminal career. We find that there are no particular associations between the reasons for their desistance and any of these variables, though social context is important. So particular social contexts are seen by those desisting as key to their wish to desist, but they may occur at different ages and it is when they are salient to that individual that they promote action. We close by discussing why this might be the case and the ramifications for theories of desistance.

KEYWORDS

age, criminal careers, desistance, longitudinal research

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1 | INTRODUCTION

In the years since the early- to mid-1990s, when research into desistance from crime exploded into a legitimate topic of research, we have developed a tremendous amount of insight into why people stop offending. Substantively, we know many of the reasons why people desist; engagement with their social context such as families and employment, as well as institutions such as armed services and universities have been found to be associated with desistance (Graham & Bowling, 1995; Sampson & Laub, 1993). Similarly, we have charted the emotional states which desisters often go through (Farrall et al., 2014) and explored the ways in which they go about changing either their identities, or the narratives which they tell themselves and others about their pasts (Maruna, 2001). Explorations which initially focused on males (e.g., Shover, 1985) have been broadened to encompass female desisters (Gålnander, 2020; Giordano, Cernkovich & Rudolph, 2002; Österman, 2018), and some have charted processes of desistance for various ethnicities (Calverly, 2013). More recently, the desistance of particular types of offenders has been explored, most notably sex offenders (Thompson & Thomas with Karstedt, 2019) but also white-collar offenders (Hunter, 2015) and car thieves (Light, Nee & Ingham, 1993). We know of studies of desistance in England, Scotland (McCulloch, 2005), Brazil (Bugnon, 2020), Australia (Halsey, Armstrong & Wright, 2016), France (Fernando, 2021; Kazemian, 2019), Sweden (Gålnander, 2020; Österman, 2018), the USA (Giordano, 2016; Mulvey & Schubert, 2016; Sampson & Laub, 1993), Canada (F.-Dufour & Brassard, 2014), Chile (Villagra, 2019), Spain (Cid & Marti, 2012), Ireland (Healy, 2010), Germany (Bereswill, 2010), and Israel (Segev, 2020).

Alongside this, numerous theories have been proposed to explain why some people desist and others do not. Many of these develop ideas from earlier thinking on the causes of delinquency. Sampson & Laub's (1993) theory of age-graded informal social control, for example, draws heavily on Hirschi's (1969) work on social control, while others have incorporated insights from psychoanalysis (Gadd, 2006), existentialism (Farrall, 2005), and rational choice theories (Shover & Thompson, 1992). Both social context and the individual's own agency seem to be important (Bottoms & Shapland, 2011; Farrall, Bottoms & Shapland, 2010). As part of this work, developmental criminologists have explored the role and timing of turning points in processes of desistance (Ouimet & Le Blanc, 1996), the age-maturation relationship (Glueck & Glueck, 1950), the mediating impact of age on the employment-desistance relationship (Uggen, 2000) and the timing of parenthood in processes of desistance (Na, 2016).

However, a key element which still remains to be explored is the extent to which individuals desist for the same or different reasons according to their age, length of criminal career or the nature of their previous offending career. This issue is analogous to age-period-cohort studies (Grasso, 2016), whereby the analyses seek to disentangle the role of age, birth cohort and temporal effects. In the case of variations in accounts of desistance by age, the data needed require that respondents of different age groups are interviewed at the same time. This enables the analyst to assess the extent to which younger people may desist for a different set of reasons than older people desisting at the same time, yet in the same social context prevalent at that time. However, many quantitative samples of criminal careers are based on cohorts of people from the same school year, meaning that while variations in age are available for longitudinal analyses, it is impossible to assess if variations in reasons for desistance exist for different age groups. Some studies (Burnett, 1992; F.-Dufour & Brassard, 2014) have suggested that there may be different styles of desistance and routes away from crime. However, these are small-scale studies (e.g., F.-Dufour & Brassard had a sample of 29 with no follow up). As such, the extent to which desistance varies by age, length

of offending career or characteristics of that career represents a serious gap in our knowledge base. If it is the case that individuals cease offending for different reasons according to their age, or the nature or length of their criminal career, then theories of desistance need to become more attuned to variations in age and the causes of desistance. Similarly, if there are different reasons for desisting from crime according to, for example, the sorts of offending careers which individuals have committed, then as well as theories needing to be adapted, criminal justice system-based interventions aimed at encouraging desistance could be modified to draw upon these insights. While the research which we describe herein may sound like a marginal topic in the study of desistance, it is, in fact, of crucial importance that these matters are addressed.

In this article we examine these issues using data from a study of desistance conducted in England employing repeated interviews with those who were recruited into the study as they started a probation order and were at that point aged 17–35 years (Farrall, 2002, 2022). We therefore have a cohort which initially had a considerable age range, but which was also then followed for some 13 years. Our article proceeds by outlining the study itself, before then describing the dependent and independent variables. We then report on the data analyses before concluding what the analyses mean for both substantive research into desistance from crime and theoretical efforts in this arena.

2 | STUDY DESCRIPTION

The data we use herein come from the study of desistance and probation supervision conducted by Farrall (2002, 2022), which used self-report data from the sample from their initial interviews in 1997–1998 up to the fifth (and so far, final) round of interviews in 2010–2012. The sampling is described in full in Farrall (2002, 2022) and Farrall et al. (2014), but in summary it is a nationally representative sample of new probation order starts in 1997–1998. Of the 199 probationers interviewed, 26 (13%) were female: the same as the percentage of new probation order starts at that time.¹ The sample's age was restricted to those aged 17–35 years, and the sample was representative with regards to age of participants (restrictions allowing), offence type and sentence length. The participants were interviewed three times while on probation (1997–1999, as were their supervising probation officers), with a further sweep of interviews in 2004–2005 ($n = 51$) and a fifth round of interviews in 2010–2012 of as many interviewees who could be found, and which resulted in 105 interviews completed and a range of other outcomes produced (e.g., some people declined interview as they had not offended since before their previous interview and no longer wished to discuss the matter). Interviewees were asked about a range of topics, including their offending since the previous interview, how and why they ceased offending, how any other people or agencies had assisted them, and similar topics germane to their desistance.

3 | DEPENDENT VARIABLES – HOW WE DEFINED DESISTANCE

Within the confines of this study, desistance was defined as being on a continuum, with, for example, both a recent commitment to avoiding further offending (where possible, supported by evidence of attempts at behavioural modification) and several years of non-offending behaviour counting as desistance (see Farrall et al., 2014). This was achieved via the construction of a case history for each sample participant. This coding took account of various events and processes which had taken place, how and why these had occurred, what they meant to the individual

concerned, and how individuals reacted to them. Wherever possible, accounts of offending careers were checked against official records and past accounts from the interviewees themselves and, if needed, interviews with their probation officer(s).²

All of the 199 sample members were coded up to their last interview for whether they had desisted or not, and if they had desisted why this was (based on *our* interpretation of *their* statements and supporting data, as noted above). These supporting data included a check of their criminal records (which would have corroborated or discounted their claims to have desisted). The reasons for desisting are therefore the desisters' *own* views, but supplemented by additional data. Of the 199, some 39 had not been seen enough to classify in terms of desistance or persistence. These were often participants who were seen at the first sweep only and who, in effect, disappeared from the criminal justice system. Some of these respondents may have died (but only some reports of their deaths could be found), or may have left the UK. Either way, there were not enough data for a reliable coding of their desistance/persistence to be made. Of the remaining 160, some 69 were still offending when last seen (confirmed by self-report, official records or in many cases both). This left us with a sample of 91 desisters. However, of these, two did not provide enough data for us to code the reasons for their desistance, bringing the number of cases for analyses to 89. There are a number of these cases for which some data were missing, meaning that we have around 85–89 participants for analyses. Based on their interviews and the data the original research team collected about them as they searched for them (for example, their statements about why they had stopped offending, even if they did not want to be interviewed), we coded the reason(s) for their desistance. Participants' responses and other data were coded for up to six reasons (such as, e.g., 'employment', 'value change', or 'disassociation from area'). This resulted in the coding frame described in Table 1. Each individual code/reason given was then grouped into clusters of explanations which relate to the various explanations from desistance theories in the literature. These are merely labels and do not presume adopting a particular version of these explanations. So, for example, Rational Choice explanations are about weighing up the costs and benefits of continuing to offend (as described by Shover & Thompson, 1992), rather than making a conscious decision to stop offending (as per Paternoster & Bushway, 2009).

Because each participant could be coded for more than one perceived contributory factor in their desistance, Table 1 gives the number (*n*) of participants where the code applied, the percentage of these codes, and finally the percentage of participants for which this applied. Thus, we can see that there were 19 participants where the fear of prison appeared to be a contributory factor in their desistance (which represented 6% of the percentages of *reasons*, but 10% of the *participants*). Similarly, there were 21 participants where it was felt that their children were a contributory factor in their desistance, which represents 6% of coded reasons, and 11% of participants. As will be clear from Table 1, each of the subcodes (e.g., family (of origin)) were recoded into explanation codes (e.g., Informal Social Control) and formed one of the independent variables (to which we now turn).

4 | INDEPENDENT VARIABLES

In addition to the above, we also coded participants for four further variables:

The age at which the participant reported their last offence was coded into a categorical variable with the values 18–25; 26–29; 30–33; 34–38; and above 38 years, which placed participants into one of five (roughly equal in number) age groups.

TABLE 1 Reasons for desisting from crime (n = 199)

Reason for desisting	N of participants	% of reasons given	% of participants
Rational Choice explanations			
No need to reoffend	1	–	–
Fear of prison	19	6	10
'Too much to lose'	4	1	2
'One-Off' explanations			
'It was just a phase'	12	4	6
'It was a "one-off" situation'	10	3	5
Informal Social Control explanations			
Because of:			
Family (of origin)	7	2	4
Family (of formation)	7	2	4
Partner	16	5	10
Children	21	6	11
Friends	1	–	1
Employment	7	2	4
Criminal Justice explanations			
Because of action by:			
Probation	6	2	3
Probation partnerships	2	1	1
Drug/Alcohol Rehabilitation explanations			
Alcohol rehabilitation	5	2	3
Drug rehabilitation	17	5	9
Change in Values/Attitudes explanations			
Attitude change	36	11	18
Value change	7	2	4
Diachronic Self-Control explanations*			
Disassociation from area	23	7	12
Avoided the police	2	1	1
Self-Control explanations			
Avoided temptation	5	2	3
'Myself'	7	2	4
Other cases			
Had not desisted	69	21	35
Not seen enough to code	39	12	20
Not enough information to code	2	–	1

Notes: '–' means less than 0.5% of respondents/responses. Note that percentages add up to more than 100 because more than one reason was coded.

*Diachronic self-control refers to situations in which the person wishing to desist realises the potential difficulties they face, and decides deliberately to keep away from particular people or environments, resulting in social isolation (Bottoms, 2006).

The *year when they reported their last offence as having happened* was recoded into a variable with two categories (1997–2006, and after 2006). This captured the start of the economic downturn of 2007 in the UK and allows us to see whether the results were more about longitudinal societal change, rather than age.

The *length of their criminal career* was coded into a further variable which was coded for criminal careers of 1–2 years; 3–8 years; 9–14 years; 15–23 years; and more than 23 years.

The *nature of their criminal careers* (in terms of the potential influences of drugs and alcohol on the sorts of offences which they committed and aspects of their wider lifestyles) was coded to represent those with limited criminal careers (mostly only one conviction but potentially more self-reported offences); those dependent on drugs who were desisting; those dependent on alcohol who were desisting; and those who had a varied conviction history, primarily of ‘street offences’.

Early in the fieldwork for the fifth sweep in 2010–2012, the original research team noticed that several interviewees reported similar experiences of desisting (or not desisting), and similar lifestyles to one another, and this led us to consider possible ways of grouping such people together as below (Farrall et al., 2014, pp.95–96). In classifying participants, this team relied not just on recent interviews with them, but also on earlier interviews with them and their former probation officers, as well as observations made while searching for people (in some instances relatives provided information about deceased individuals or people they were not able to interview for other reasons), and official conviction data. The classification is best thought of as a taxonomy, rather than a typology.

4.1 | Offenders with limited criminal careers (n = 24)

Most of the offenders classed as having a limited criminal career tended only to have been *convicted* once – but many said they had in the past been offending for some time. Their past offending was often in adolescence or related to a particular crisis in their adult lives. So they saw it as ‘in the past’ and that they had ‘grown out of it’ or the problems had been resolved. These desisters tended to be married or in relationships, working, had children and had fewer problems in their lives than the other groups (see Farrall et al. (2014, ch. 4) for details). The number of aspects of their personal lives which were ‘problematic’ (e.g., their employment, drug, alcohol use or accommodation) was significantly lower than those for the other three groups. So they tended in general to be leading relatively conventional lives in this, desisting, phase of their lives.

Despite the lower extent of problems, some had had previous contact with counselling services (for drugs, alcohol or mental health difficulties), but none were at the time of the last interview in contact with these agencies. Just two had been to prison at any time, significantly fewer compared with the whole sample in the study. There were no convictions for this group in the last ten years or so, except for two in relation to driving with excess alcohol, nor did they self-report offending beyond a few occasionally smoking a small amount of cannabis. They were, by and large, at the time of the last interview leading very conventional lives.

4.2 | Drug offenders who desisted (n = 23)

The second group of offenders involves those who had a considerable period of illegal drug use – and longer careers than the first group. Their drug use included using Class A drugs such as heroin or crack cocaine³ and usually included injecting the drug, sometimes over as many as 20 plus years. Their criminal career included convictions for possession of drugs (or supplying them, usually to friends) but also property crimes (shop theft, theft, handling stolen goods, burglary, welfare fraud), often again over many years. Their lifestyles had often been ‘chaotic’ and by and large focused on the acquiring and consumption of drugs, and all that this entailed in terms of offending.

Their lives tended to be interspersed with drug rehabilitation programmes (often residential), followed by relapses (or indeed not managing to get free of drugs during rehabilitation). The drug rehabilitation residential programmes might be outside their home area, but the relapses followed returning home. Eventually desistance tended to come from attending a programme away from home, getting clean (and often staying in that area), but then managing to return home without re-succumbing to drug usage.

Their lives resembled closely the pattern of the overall sample (which included both persisters and desisters) (see Farrall et al. (2014) for details). So, a minority were married or in a stable relationship. About a third were employed but a quarter were too ill to work, because of their long-term drug use. Several were employed in drug rehabilitation programmes (as Maruna’s (2001) sample had been) – but some felt that their employment chances were restricted to drug-related schemes. Around 70% had children. Nearly half had spent some time in prison. Overall, they had slightly more social and personal problems than the total sample, but were not really very different in this, except that the desisting drug offenders had more problems than the persisting drug offenders.

4.3 | Street offenders who desisted (n = 31)

The group of ‘street offenders’ had committed quite a wide variety of offences. Rarely (and if so only briefly) had they used substances such as heroin, preferring to use cannabis, cocaine, ecstasy and LSD recreationally. Some had also sold such drugs, but often just to friends or acquaintances. Although none were alcoholics in our assessment, many had enjoyed a ‘party’ lifestyle (Shover & Honaker, 1992). They had desisted from longer criminal careers (on average around 14 years, similar in this respect to the drug and alcohol offenders) but were not addicted to drugs or alcohol. This is in keeping with several other studies (Shapland & Bottoms, 2017; Shover, 1996; Stander et al., 1989) which have shown that, at least in later adolescence and as young adults, those who offend repeatedly tend to commit a variety of offences (burglary, theft, assaults, driving/car related matters). Specialists in terms of offending in this age group are rare.

As seen in other longitudinal studies (Sampson & Laub, 1993), desistance in this group was related to changes in people’s lives and social circumstances – though these changes were not necessarily thrust upon them, but as their lives changed, so they began to appreciate what they now had and started seeing it as at risk from continued offending. So desistance was related to marriage/being in a particular long-term relationship, to children and to gaining employment. The only major difference from other groups was that this street crime group was overwhelmingly male (98%). Most employment was manual or semi-manual, though it did often involve

skill. The self-image of the street crime desister tended to be of the 'working father', providing for his family (Gadd & Farrall, 2004). Desistance was not normally a sudden one-off decision, but something attempted, failing at and then trying again, usually several times, before a more stable non-offending lifestyle was achieved.

4.4 | Alcoholics who desisted (n = 11)

There was a smaller group in the sample who were addicted to alcohol, rather than illegal drugs (termed 'alcohol-related offenders' in the tables below). Many were clinically addicted to alcohol, but some saw alcohol as a hiding place or refuge, away from their difficulties. For this group, offending tended to be linked to alcohol and its effects, with convictions for assault, resisting arrest, being drunk and disorderly and driving matters. Some had lost friends, families, homes and careers to their alcoholism, resulting in periods of 'rough sleeping' or 'sofa surfing', while others had managed to avoid the worse of these losses and remained in relatively stable conditions. Due to the difference in the sorts of offences which alcoholics and drug users committed, and the differing criminal status of such substances, we treated these two groups separately.

Here again, undertaking several detoxification courses was the norm before they managed to cease drinking. Desistance from crime, however, did not necessarily mean desistance from alcohol consumption, but they had managed to not be convicted for a number of years. Though those in this group were more likely to be married or in a stable relationship than the sample as a whole, only a quarter were working. Very similar proportions to the whole sample had children. Like the drug desisters, half had experienced prison. These desisting alcoholics tended to have the highest number of social and personal problems of all the desisting groups, with no clear pattern of why they desisted (though it is a relatively small sample).

Our taxonomy of styles of desistance is as much about each group's lifestyles during both their period of offending and afterwards as it is about the sorts of offences which they committed. It is not, therefore, a grouping built simply upon offence types, but a rather more subtle grouping which took into account lifestyles too.

5 | DATA ANALYSES AND RESULTS

To what extent did the respondents in the four desistance trajectories outlined above have the same or different explanations for their desistance (Table 2)? Because of the small number (n) of participants, clear trends are not immediately obvious (and because respondents could give more than one answer, statistical tests are impossible – hence these are purely descriptive results). Overall, as one might imagine, explanations stressing the uniqueness of the situation which led to their offending were more common among those who had short criminal careers, and were looking back over what was a considerable time period. They were much less common among those who had had other forms of criminal careers. Families of formation and children were, however, less important for those with shorter offending careers. This is not to suggest that they did not have families or children, but rather these were not factors we deduced from their accounts in why they stopped offending. This could be seen as reinforcing the idea that desistance is *not* a sudden occurrence sparked by some new phenomena impacting upon one's life. These factors (children and families of formation) were more frequently cited by all other offending career groups (which tended to have much longer offending careers).

TABLE 2 Reasons for desisting from crime by nature of criminal career

Reason for desisting	Limited offending careers	Desisting drug offenders	Desisting street offenders	Desisting alcohol-related offenders	Total n (row %)
Rational Choice explanations					
No need to reoffend	0	0	1	0	1 (100)
Fear of prison	6	4	6	2	18 (100)
'Too much to lose'	0	2	1	1	4 (100)
'One-Off' explanations					
'It was just a phase'	10	0	2	0	12 (100)
'It was a "one-off" situation'	10	0	0	0	10 (100)
Informal Social Control explanations					
Family (of origin)	1	3	2	1	7 (100)
Family (of formation)	0	3	3	1	7 (100)
Partner	4	4	6	1	15 (100)
Children	1	7	9	2	19 (100)
Friends	0	0	1	0	1 (100)
Employment	1	2	3	1	7 (100)
Criminal Justice explanations					
Probation	1	1	4	0	6 (100)
Probation partnerships	0	0	1	1	2 (100)

(Continues)

TABLE 2 (Continued)

Reason for desisting	Limited offending careers	Desisting drug offenders	Desisting street offenders	Desisting alcohol-related offenders	Total n (row %)
Drug/Alcohol Rehabilitation explanations					
Alcohol rehabilitation	0	1	1	3	7 (100)
Drug rehabilitation	0	16	1	0	17 (100)
Change in Values/Attitudes explanations					
Attitude change	4	9	15	4	31 (100)
Value change	1	3	3	0	7 (100)
Diachronic Self-Control explanations					
Disassociation from area	3	6	7	5	21 (100)
Avoided the police	1	0	1	0	2 (100)
Self-Control explanations					
Avoided temptation	1	2	1	0	5 (100)
'Myself'	2	1	2	1	6 (100)
Total (n)	24	23	31	11	89 (100)

Note: '-' means less than 0.5% of respondents/responses. Note that percentages add up to more than 100 because more than one reason was coded.

Criminal Justice explanations appeared to be more common for those desisters who had had street offending careers. Drug rehabilitation, as one might imagine, appeared to be a common feature of the desistance of former drug users. It must be remembered, however, that drug rehabilitation services are not offered to people unless they need them, so in one sense the association between drug rehabilitation courses and desistance of drug desisters is a tautology. However, drug rehabilitation is notoriously difficult and does not necessarily 'work', so the respondents associating the two is important. Attitude and value changes were most commonly found to be features of the processes of desistance for those who had had drug or street offending careers. Disassociation from an area in which one had lived or regularly offended (or both) was commonly found to be part of the process of desistance (see also Abrams & Terry, 2017; Kirk, 2009; Shapland & Bottoms, 2019).

Let us repeat the exercise, this time for the length of criminal career (the number (n) of participants is reduced further to 78 in that it was impossible to accurately assess the length of some individuals' criminal careers). Again, explanations revolving around unique situations which prompted the offending in the first place were found most commonly among those with shorter criminal careers (Table 3). Explanations relating to families of formation and children were less commonly observed for those with shorter careers. Other explanations appeared to apply fairly evenly across length of criminal careers (such as the fear of prison, the importance of children, and employment, for example).

Finally, in order to see whether explanations for desistance are linked to age or time, all four of the independent variables (age and year of last offence reported, length of criminal career and nature of criminal career) were cross-tabulated against the eight groups of explanations for desistance (that is, Rational Choice explanations, Social Control explanations, and so on). The first three of these are reported in a summary form in Table 4. Fisher's exact tests were used, given the numbers of cells with entries lower than 5.

These results suggest, in most instances, no relationship between the explanations of desistance when analysed against age at desistance, year of desistance or length of criminal career. Furthermore, the finding that younger people are more likely to have desisted for reasons related to rational choices was only just statistically significant ($p = 0.025$), and no longer significant when correcting for the multiple tests using the Bonferroni correction, while the findings that those whose offending was a one off were more likely to desist during the period 1997–2007 (shortly after they started probation – no longer significant using the Bonferroni correction) and had shorter criminal careers (still significant with the correction) are to be expected. In this sense, then, there appears to be no relationship between these variables.⁴

Let us now turn to the fourth explanatory variable. Was the nature of their offending careers related to why they ceased offending? Table 5 again summarises the results of a series of 2×2 cross-tabulation tables, with the results being given with and without the Bonferroni correction being applied, given that there were multiple simultaneous calculations being made, but the correction is known to be quite severe in its effects.

These analyses suggest that those with limited offending careers were more likely than other offending career types to cease as this was a 'one-off' situation (which is to be expected), but less likely to cease for reasons relating to drugs or alcohol rehabilitation. Substance abuse is highly likely to lead to more offending, while the problem lasts, so this would be expected. Those who had had offending careers characterised by drug use tended to desist for reasons related to drug and alcohol treatment (of course, this is partly to be expected, since only those with such problems are offered such treatment programmes – however, they must have seen it as of some help). Those

TABLE 3 Reasons for desisting from crime by length of criminal career

Reason for desisting	1–2 years	3–8 years	9–14 years	15–23 years	Over 23 years	Total n (row %)
Rational Choice explanations						
No need to reoffend	0	0	0	0	0	0 (000)
Fear of prison	4	5	5	3	0	17 (100)
‘Too much to lose’	0	1	1	0	0	2 (100)
‘One-Off’ explanations						
‘It was just a phase’	6	1	2	2	1	12 (100)
‘It was a “one-off” situation’	7	1	0	0	0	8 (100)
Informal Social Control explanations						
Family (of origin)	1	3	1	0	1	6 (100)
Family (of formation)	0	3	2	1	1	7 (100)
Partner	3	4	4	1	2	14 (100)
Children	1	4	3	6	5	19 (100)
Friends	0	0	1	0	0	1 (100)
Employment	1	2	1	1	0	5 (100)
Criminal Justice explanations						
Probation	0	3	1	1	0	5 (100)
Probation partnerships	0	1	1	0	0	2 (100)

(Continues)

TABLE 3 (Continued)

Reason for desisting	1–2 years	3–8 years	9–14 years	15–23 years	Over 23 years	Total n (row %)
Drug/Alcohol Rehabilitation explanations						
Alcohol rehabilitation	0	0	2	3	0	5 (100)
Drug rehabilitation	0	3	4	4	2	13 (100)
Change in Values/Attitudes explanations						
Attitude change	3	5	12	6	3	29 (100)
Value change	1	1	3	0	0	5 (100)
Diachronic Self-Control explanations						
Disassociation from area	4	6	4	5	3	22 (100)
Avoided the police	1	1	0	0	0	2 (100)
Self-Control explanations						
Avoided temptation	1	0	3	0	0	4 (100)
'Myself'	2	1	2	2	0	7 (100)
Total (n)	16	17	19	17	9	78

Note: '-' means less than 0.5% of respondents/responses. Note that percentages add up to more than 100 because more than one reason was coded.

TABLE 4 Reasons for desisting by age at desistance, year of desistance and length of criminal career

Reason for desisting	Age at desistance	Year of desistance	Length of criminal career
Rational choice	$X^2 = 9.6$, $df = 4$, $p = 0.025^{*,\dagger}$	$X^2 = 0.9$, $df = 1$, $p = 0.257$ ns	$X^2 = 5.3$, $df = 4$, $p = 0.247$ ns
'One-Off'	$X^2 = 6.7$, $df = 4$, $p = 0.190$ ns	Stopped 1997–2007 more likely $X^2 = 4.3$, $df = 1$, $p = 0.029^{*,\dagger}$	Shorter careers more likely $X^2 = 32.1$, $df = 4$, $p < 0.000^{***,\ddagger\ddagger}$
Informal social control	$X^2 = 5.1$, $df = 4$, $p = 0.287$ ns	$X^2 = 1.9$, $df = 1$, $p = 0.129$ ns	$X^2 = 9.1$, $df = 4$, $p = 0.062$ ns
Criminal justice assistance	$X^2 = 2.9$, $df = 4$, $p = 0.689$ ns	$X^2 = 0.8$, $df = 1$, $p = 0.532$ ns	$X^2 = 7.6$, $df = 4$, $p = 0.143$ ns
Drug/alcohol rehabilitation	$X^2 = 4.1$, $df = 4$, $p = 0.339$ ns	$X^2 = 3.1$, $df = 1$, $p = 0.077$ ns	$X^2 = 7.3$, $df = 4$, $p = 0.068$ ns
Change in values/attitudes	$X^2 = 0.8$, $df = 4$, $p = 0.934$ ns	$X^2 = 2.8$, $df = 1$, $p = 0.080$ ns	$X^2 = 8.0$, $df = 5$, $p = 0.099$ ns
Diachronic self-control	$X^2 = 1.8$, $df = 4$, $p = 0.776$ ns	$X^2 = 0.0$, $df = 1$, $p = 0.571$ ns	$X^2 = 2.1$, $df = 4$, $p = 0.724$ ns
Self-control	$X^2 = 4.7$, $df = 4$, $p = 0.347$ ns	$X^2 = 0.3$, $df = 1$, $p = 0.415$ ns	$X^2 = 3.5$, $df = 4$, $p = 0.542$ ns

Notes: Fisher's exact test. Chi-square values (X^2), degrees of freedom (df), p values (ns) = not statistically significant;

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

\dagger Applying the Bonferroni correction, given the multiple simultaneous tests, this relation is no longer significant (threshold p of 0.00625).

$\ddagger\ddagger$ Applying the Bonferroni correction, this relation remains significant.

TABLE 5 Reasons for desisting by nature of criminal career

Reason for desisting	Limited offending careers	Desisting drug offenders	Desisting street offenders	Desisting alcohol-related offenders
Rational choice	$X^2 = 0.1$, $df = 1$, $p = 0.557$ ns	$X^2 = 0.1$, $df = 1$, $p = 0.496$ ns	$X^2 = 0.0$, $df = 1$, $p = 0.502$ ns	$X^2 = 0.2$, $df = 1$, $p = 0.453$ ns
'One-Off'	Those with limited careers more likely $X^2 = 62.2$, $df = 1$, $p < 0.001$ ***,††	Those with drug offending careers less likely $X^2 = 9.8$, $df = 1$, $p = 0.002$ **,††	Those with street offending careers less likely $X^2 = 5.9$, $df = 1$, $p = 0.015$ *,†	$X^2 = 3.5$, $df = 1$, $p = 0.053$ ns
Informal social control	Those with limited careers less likely $X^2 = 5.9$, $df = 1$, $p = 0.015$ *,†	$X^2 = 0.0$, $df = 1$, $p = 0.521$ ns	Those with street offending careers less likely $X^2 = 4.4$, $df = 1$, $p = 0.037$ *,†	$X^2 = 0.0$, $df = 1$, $p = 0.528$ ns
Criminal justice assistance	$X^2 = 0.8$, $df = 1$, $p = 0.322$ ns	$X^2 = 0.7$, $df = 1$, $p = 0.349$ ns	$X^2 = 1.9$, $df = 1$, $p = 0.179$ ns	$X^2 = 0.0$, $df = 1$, $p = 0.622$ ns
Drug/alcohol rehabilitation	Those with limited careers less likely $X^2 = 9.8$, $df = 1$, $p = 0.002$ **,†	Those with drug offending careers more likely $X^2 = 37.5$, $df = 1$, $p < 0.001$ ***,††	Those with street offending careers less likely $X^2 = 5.3$, $df = 1$, $p = 0.021$ *,†	$X^2 = 0.3$, $df = 1$, $p = 0.417$ ns
Change in values/attitudes	Those with limited careers less likely $X^2 = 7.8$, $df = 1$, $p = 0.005$ **,††	$X^2 = 0.0$, $df = 1$, $p = 0.532$ ns	$X^2 = 3.5$, $df = 1$, $p = 0.050$ ns	$X^2 = 0.0$, $df = 1$, $p = 0.622$ ns
Diachronic self-control	$X^2 = 1.9$, $df = 1$, $p = 0.131$ ns	$X^2 = 0.0$, $df = 1$, $p = 0.547$ ns	$X^2 = 0.0$, $df = 1$, $p = 0.477$ ns	$X^2 = 2.8$, $df = 1$, $p = 0.098$ ns
Self-control	$X^2 = 0.0$, $df = 1$, $p = 0.598$ ns	$X^2 = 0.0$, $df = 1$, $p = 0.563$ ns	$X^2 = 0.7$, $df = 1$, $p = 0.306$ ns	$X^2 = 0.0$, $df = 1$, $p = 0.653$ ns

Notes: Fisher's exact test. Chi-square values (X^2), degrees of freedom (df), p values (ns) = not statistically significant;

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

†Applying the Bonferroni correction, given the multiple simultaneous tests, this relation is no longer significant (threshold p of 0.00625).

††Applying the Bonferroni correction, this relation remains significant.

with street offending careers and those with alcohol-related offending careers did not appear to cite any particular form of explanation for desistance.

What is also of interest is those explanations which are not statistically associated with any of the forms of offending careers. These include Rational Choice explanations, help from the criminal justice system and either Diachronic Self-Control or Self-Control. Rational Choice explanations for desistance were not common, and mainly associated with early forays into the field (e.g., Cusson and Pinnsonneault, 1986; Shover, 1983; Shover & Thompson, 1992). It could be that the age of the sample when initially recruited (17–35 years) meant that the rational choice sort of decisions made by Shover's sample of older offenders were not made by this cohort simply because of their age. By the time this cohort was interviewed for the fifth time, they were some 12–13 years older (so nearer 30–48 years), still younger than Shover's sample (who were all aged over 50 years). Assistance from the criminal justice system was also absent as an explanatory factor. This is not to suggest that such interventions never work (see Farrall et al. (2014) on how these were seen to be helpful later on in the sample's desistance, when they were looking back), but rather that the incidence of them being the explanatory factor did not vary by the nature of the offending career. Similarly, both of the Self Control explanations showed no variation by offending career trajectory.

6 | DISCUSSION

Our exploration of the available datasets started with the question of whether desistance pathways relate to the age of the person trying to desist. The age-crime curve in Western countries shows a peak at around 18–21 years and a gradual decline after that. So are the reasons why those in their early 20s desist the same as the reasons for those in their late 20s or 30s? Using the dataset of 17- to 35-year-olds (at the start of the study, but around 30–50 years at the last sweep) available to us, we found, to our surprise, that there seemed to be almost no difference in explanations for desistance given by the respondents by age. The same was true of other variables related to age, such as length of criminal career, or the year in which the last conviction occurred. Given that people's lives in Western countries such as England and Wales tend to have rather different social circumstances at age 30–40 years compared with the early 20s, this is a surprising finding. In their early 20s, relatively few are often in long-term, stable relationships, or have children, or have settled employment. People may be still searching for their path in life. By their mid-30s, partners, children and employment tend to feature more strongly in people's lives.

The exception to this lack of significance of types of explanation by age was for those with limited criminal careers. Here, explanations that 'it was just a phase' or a 'one-off situation' were significantly more common. These explanations bring with them the idea that 'that was me then, this is me now', which have echoes of the 'knifing-off' of Maruna's (2001) desisting drug users or those in Shapland & Bottoms's (2011) study who were horrified that they might still be stealing cars to joyride, because they saw that crime as a youthful thing belonging to a past phase of their lives – note that these had not necessarily given up other forms of crime. The limited criminal career group in our analyses clearly did not see themselves as having a continuing identity as an offender (see Shapland & Bottoms, 2011).

The other form of explanation that differentiated groups was the impact of drug rehabilitation therapies on desisting drug offenders. It is not surprising that drug rehabilitation therapies were not mentioned by other groups such as street offenders; given that they will only have been experienced by those with a drug problem. It is, however, notable that they were given weight by desisting drug offenders, given that such periods in rehabilitation tend to have very variable

success rates. It was clear that similar alcohol rehabilitation therapies had not had the same kind of impact on respondents with alcohol problems.

Other than these explanations, there was little to distinguish the kinds of explanations given by offenders with different criminal careers and ages. Some factors, they felt, had been important in their desistance – but those at different ages cited similar factors. So attitude changes, dissociation from that geographical area in which they had offended, partners and children were all thought to be important by some, but not by others, and this did not vary by age or time period.

Desistance theorists have picked up these same factors as potentially relevant to desistance in its earlier stages (as opposed to maintenance late-on after many years of non-offending). So Sampson & Laub (1993) singled out stable partners (marriage), employment and, at that period, military service, as key in promoting desistance, which they have seen as turning points. Abrams & Terry (2017), in their exploration of the journeys of formerly incarcerated youth in the US towards desistance, *Everyday desistance*, argue that a 'blend of internal and external factors contributed to supporting their desistance goals, with some factors playing a more prevalent role at different times in their lives than others' (p.173). These factors included employment/unemployment, family issues, accommodation, needing to manage space to keep away from previous associates, availability of support, and signalling to others that one is no longer in a gang through dress. As we have also pointed up, sustaining motivation to desist (agency) is also crucial. Giordano (2016) indicates that 'hooks for change' can include partners, family, treatment experiences, parenthood, religion and prison but are rooted in the social experiences of individuals. Mulvey & Schubert (2016) stress the complicated nature of people's lives as they are trying to desist, with 'chained events' (e.g., income changes being linked to accommodation and place of residence, as well as peer influences), such that it is the individual's own view of these events which links to desistance. Healy (2016, p.53) shows that, comparing the different economic circumstances in Ireland over time, though overall structural societal changes (such as availability of employment) were important, for those trying to desist it was their own 'opportunity structures within their immediate social environment' (such as being able to access support during economic change) that were key in explaining change or maintaining desistance. Hence, there seems to be a number of social factors which are linked to desistance in different places at different times, but who they affect depends upon the individual's own social circumstances, opportunities and perceptions of their importance at the time at which they are motivated to desist.

Our current results, though exploratory and tentative, because they are based on one sample in one country, suggest that several of these different factors are relevant, but that what matters is which is encountered by the individual at what time in their life. We could say there is a 'family' of desistance circumstances, almost all of which remain relevant over age and length of criminal career. Encountering them is then about individual variation in lives and social contexts.

However, simply 'encountering' a particular social circumstance does not seem to be enough. Being in a stable partnership, for example, promotes and maintains desistance, but not for every stable partnership the offender is in, nor for all offenders. The partnership has to become and be realised as significant by that offender for it to become key to their desistance. Hence our view of these desistance circumstances is not quite the same as that of Laub & Sampson (2003), that is, a circumstance being a 'turning point' which can be 'applied' to a person which will then create desistance, or which the person can stumble across and will then act on them. We would say that the person himself or herself has to recognise the social circumstance as significant for them and seek to retain it and, through that effort, see that continuing offending is detrimental to continuing to enjoy the social circumstance. Agency remains as important to desistance as social context and structures.

The process can be seen relatively clearly in relation to separation from the geographical locality where the offender was based while offending. Staying in the same place is clearly problematic, as the person trying to desist continues to encounter previous co-offenders, people who may have a 'grudge' against him or her, and situations in which he or she has previously fallen into temptation (Shapland & Bottoms, 2011, 2019). Diachronic self-control, in which the person realises the potential difficulties and decides deliberately to keep away from those environments, and the resulting isolation (because new friends and non-criminal situations have not yet been encountered) have been found in a number of studies of those who are relatively successfully trying to desist (Abrams & Terry, 2017; Calverley, 2013; Shapland & Bottoms, 2011). Moving away voluntarily or semi-voluntarily, perhaps to a drug rehabilitation programme which requires relocation for participation, was found in Farrall et al.'s (2014) study to create breaks in offending for former drug using desisters. However, relapses (to both drugs and offending) often occurred, particularly where the person moved back to the original location. It could take several such rehabilitation periods, followed by moving back to the original location and not immediately falling into offending/drugs again, before sustained desistance could be achieved. We suspect, therefore, that diachronic self-control, and possibly the rest of the 'family' of desistance circumstances require both agency and a sustained period of effort to 'work'. By 'sustained period of effort' we are certainly thinking in terms of years for some people, possibly extending to a decade of efforts to desist.

We are therefore proposing that, though there is a 'family' of explanations of desistance it is not random exposure which counts. What matters is what that exposure means to the desister and how it is valued by them. Furthermore, the data need to be carefully interpreted. For example, we find that as many of the Limited Career Desisters (6%) suggested that their fear of imprisonment prompted their desistance as was the case for the Desisting Street Offenders (also 6%). However, these were two rather different groups of desisters; one being much less engaged with the justice system than the other. For the Desisting Street Offenders, prison was quite possibly a real risk (and one many of them would have experienced, if only while on remand), while for those with far fewer convictions, it was a more 'remote' and 'imagined' prospect. These seemingly 'rational choice' explanations require careful unpacking since what is 'rational' is not an objective assessment; what matters is the desister's own view and this will be (partly) shaped by their previous experiences. Over time, what is seen as 'a cost' and the size of that 'cost' will change. A young first-time court defendant may view a possible custodial sentence with rather more trepidation than an older individual who has already served two or three custodial sentences and who knows how to 'do time'.

Our findings also raise questions for theories of desistance which draw heavily upon maturation (Mulvey & Schubert, 2016). If explanations for desistance are age-invariant (which the analyses reported herein would suggest they are), then what does maturation mean? The results suggest it is not simply physical maturation, measured by age. It could be what one might call 'social maturation', potentially linked to mental maturation and physiological functioning (which we know varies between individuals with the suggestion that it may occur later in male offenders: Mulvey & Schubert (2016)), but also related to social contexts? In which case the most thorough model of maturation may require measurements of biological, psychological and social maturation, as Mulvey & Schubert (2016) have proposed. Our finding that there was no 'age-effect' suggests that social maturation may be a key variable, since this will be influenced by social and cultural norms.

7 | STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS OF THIS STUDY

The strengths of the current study lie in the original research design; a group of adjudicated offenders (with any number of previous convictions) serving a non-custodial sentence of at least six months and no more than 24 months, with no additional selection criteria for offence type. This means that the sample consists of individuals whose offences were serious enough to warrant prosecution (even if only once) and who all remained in the community, meaning that 'naturally-occurring' changes in their social and personal lives and perspectives on life and 'right' and 'wrong' were available for study. The age selection requirement (they had to be 17–35 years at the outset of the study in 1997–1998) meant that chronological age is available as a variable for analysis in a different way from that of most other studies (where cohort members are typically born within twelve months of one another in the case of a school-based sample). The sample was drawn from six English probation service areas, covering a capital city, large metropolitan areas and smaller towns. Because the respondents were re-interviewed until 2010–2013, we were able to track the development of their lives and criminal careers over a period of approximately 13–15 years for the majority. An assessment of the achieved follow-up sample at sweep 5 (Farrall et al., 2014, p.90) suggested that it remained representative of the initial sample, which was itself representative of 'new starts' on probation orders in the late-1990s. Because the interviews have always contained at least some element of qualitative data (and the vast majority were audio recorded at sweeps 4 and 5) we have a richness of data which sometimes escapes larger, quantitative studies.

The weaknesses of the study are almost the strengths in inverse. The study comprises a sample of exclusively those detected, arrested, charged, prosecuted, convicted and sentenced, meaning that those who have avoided any one of the above would not be included in it. Because the original sample was aged 17–35 years at the outset, and had reached the age of approximately 30–50 years at the end of the fifth sweep, it does not include those very old (in criminal careers terms) in their 60s. The relatively modest sample at outset (199), means that, allowing for deaths, emigrations, refusals and those who simply could not be relocated, it dropped to 105 (although there were some data on many of those who could not be interviewed). When one discounts those who persisted ($n = 69$), the sample of desisters for whom we had sufficient usable data was 91. While, in the context of a qualitative longitudinal project, this is a large sample, it is not sufficiently large for us to have undertaken interaction analyses to control for more variables or interaction effects. Equally, since the fieldwork started in six English probation service areas, this is a study of one country, and one needs to bear in mind that differences may exist both in other parts of the UK and in other countries. We know, for example, that family is a particularly important dimension in Spain (Cid & Marti, 2012) and in Israel (Segev, 2020), but only seen as very significant for some ethnic minority groups in England (Calverley, 2013). Hence the 'family' of explanations for desistance we have outlined may be slightly different in different countries. What we can say, however, is that the family of explanations seems to be pretty similar across ages of offenders and time.

ENDNOTES

¹ Given the number of female participants in the sample, no analyses by gender are presented herein.

² Data relating to breaches of conditions of court disposals (such as failing to attend meetings with probation officers) were not often reported in the self-reported data. Hence our examination of desistance excludes the 'secondary offences' committed as a result of being on supervision. The checks of official records, probation officers and previous interviews in the main supported the self-report data from the fifth round of interviews.

³ In the UK illegal drugs are graded from Class A (the most addictive) to Class C.

⁴ We have provided results with and without the Bonferroni correction because it can give very conservative results; see, for example, Mohler et al. (2020).

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