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De-Sisters: Understanding women's desistance from crime in Aotearoa.

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Abstract

Desistance from crime is increasingly understood as a developmental and relational process embedded within social environments. Efforts to establish a life beyond crime are frequently complicated by cumulative disadvantages, including unresolved trauma, fractured or harmful relationships, economic precarity, and enduring experiences of systemic exclusion. Despite growing scholarly interest in desistance, women's lived experiences of navigating change remain marginal within the literature, with limited empirical attention given to the specific social, cultural, and structural contexts shaping desistance in Aotearoa New Zealand. Across the narratives of twelve women once caught in cycles of recidivism, this study offers new insight into the factors which support and obstruct lives beyond crime. Desistance is revealed as a process of self-discovery, healing and relational connection. The study maps the psychological and relational terrain of change, exposing an uneven landscape produced by minimal access to therapeutic intervention and limited cultural integration. Under these conditions, efforts to reconstruct identity were further complicated by the persistent digital trace of conviction, amplifying both private and public forms of stigma. Women leaving prison are often unprepared and underdeveloped, desisting within hazardous reintegration environments. Desistance advanced when agency was restored, highlighting the need for coordinated systemic reform to strengthen human, social, and recovery capital, modernise correctional provisions, and formalise post-release advocacy.

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Chapter One: Introduction

When male and female offenders are compared, the general risk factors for reoffending are essentially the same, such as past behaviour, anti-social attitudes, personality pathology, criminal associates and substance abuse (Pierce, 2019). The differences between sexes, however, lie in the areas of mental health and co-dependence which creates low efficacy (Pierce, 2019). The maturation theory of aging out of crime (Moffitt, 1993; Sampson and Laub, 1993), widely accepted in criminological research, remains insufficient for women particularly because it fails to consider the intergenerational transmission of offending behaviours (Stretton, 2023). For this reason, women do not bear the luxury of time to age out of crime, the risk of intergenerational transmission necessitates early and deliberate intervention to disrupt cycles of offending.

Study Aims

This thesis examines the factors which drive recidivist women to transition from a criminal lifestyle to a crime-free lifestyle. Drawing on existing theory and literature as well as qualitative research, it considers the factors which formerly incarcerated women identify as influencing their pathways of change. The opportunity is taken here to amplify the voices of lived experience, giving space to women once caught in cycles of harm to share their insights and offer a gendered perspective of desistance from crime in the context of Aotearoa New Zealand.

The objectives of this study include recognising narrative dimensions absent from dominant discourse and gaining insight into the factors influencing desistance as a process characterised by progression, disruption and renewal.

Rationale

The significance of this work lies in its contribution to both scholarship and practice. Traditional desistance theories, while often framed through abstract theoretical lenses, provide valuable frameworks for understanding the processes of change experienced by justice system impacted individuals. Over two decades of walking alongside women striving to break cycles of harm I have observed the resonance of these theories in practice. Despite the alignment between theory and lived experience, women are continuing to suffer within systems which neglect to illuminate clear pathways toward recovery, healing and desistance from crime. There is an urgent need to amplify the voices and involve the women as contributors to the knowledge which shapes policy and practice.

This study contributes to bridging the gap between theory and application by situating women's lived experiences alongside established theoretical frameworks. In doing so, this research seeks to make desistance knowledge accessible, relatable, and useful to those tasked with supporting change. With improved understanding of the interconnected factors which enable transformation, agencies and practitioners can design and deliver interventions which are more responsive and effective.

Thesis Outline

Chapter One defines the concept of desistance as it relates to this study and then examines the gendered dimensions of crime. It establishes that while the general risk factors for offending are broadly consistent across men and women, women's offending is more often relationally and contextually situated. The chapter then situates the research within the context of Aotearoa New Zealand, where Māori women remain significantly over-represented in prisons as a result of the enduring impacts of colonisation, structural inequities, and intergenerational disadvantage. Finally, the discussion turns inward to consider the internal

dimensions of change, exploring the concept of identity as a central mechanism for desistance from crime.

Chapter Two reviews the key literature on desistance from crime. It introduces the three spheres of desistance, primary, secondary, and tertiary, before examining ontogenic (individual maturation) and sociogenic (social process) perspectives. Together, these discussions provide an overview of the leading theories in the field and establish the conceptual framework through which women's desistance is explored in this study.

Chapter Three outlines the study's methodological framework. It begins with a positionality statement before presenting participant data and addressing key ethical considerations, including insider research, cultural sensitivity, and participant safety. A purposive sampling strategy guided recruitment, and qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews informed by a feminist epistemology and social realist orientation. Data were analysed manually using a thematic coding approach. The chapter concludes by acknowledging methodological limitations and introducing the participants, providing the foundation for the analysis presented in the following chapters.

Chapter Four presents the findings and discussion centred on the key theme of addiction recovery. It traces the women's entry points into their desistance journeys before exploring the challenges encountered along the way. It examines how recovery is challenged by unresolved trauma and exposure to criminogenic environments. It concludes by outlining the implications of these findings and offering suggestions to support women's healing and improve recovery capital.

Chapter Five presents the findings and discussion on the key theme of employment. It examines how employment provides stability, promotes identity transformation, and supports tertiary desistance. The chapter highlights stigma and digital punishment as enduring barriers to work, while showing that women engaged with structured reintegration services were more

likely to access facilitated employment pathways. It concludes with implications of the findings and recommendations for policy reform.

Chapter Six presents the findings and discussion on the key theme of education. It demonstrates how the women made sense of their pasts, developed self-efficacy, and reconnected with cultural identity through education. The chapter also exposes the uneven educational landscape within prisons, where learning is undervalued, access to Mātauranga Māori is siloed, and educational provision is restricted by the limited availability of secure digital learning infrastructure. It concludes by outlining the implications of these findings.

Conceptualising Desistance

In colloquial terms, desistance from crime describes the process of going straight (Jasni et al., 2023). However, the academic conceptualisation of desistance has evolved significantly over time. Androcentric models of desistance propose that, for some individuals, movement away from crime is not consciously enacted, but occurs as life naturally evolves (Sampson & Laub, 1993). Contemporary scholarship builds upon this processual understanding, cautioning against framing desistance solely as a crime-free destination which tends to overlook ambivalence and fluctuations in terms of life choices and change (Kazemian, 2007).

Debate continues to persist over how much emphasis should be placed on internal versus external factors in shaping desistance. This tension reflects longstanding divisions in criminological thought, between the classical school, which portrays offenders as rational actors making conscious choices, and the positivist school, which highlights the sociological conditions which assist or constrain those choices (Paternoster et al., 2015). Burnett's (2004) qualitative study of 130 career criminals discovered desistance as a journey involves "reversals of decisions, indecision, compromise and lapses" (p. 169). Similarly, more recent discourse situates desistance as a series of processes leading toward the cessation of crime,

where the termination of offending is the destination, and desistance is the journey (Le Blanc & Frechette, 2013). Prominent identity theorists, such as Giordano et al. (2002), maintain that “crime cessation should be conceptualised as a process... in understanding factors associated with such journeys” (p. 788). Desistance from crime is best understood as a process shaped by the interplay of individual, social, and structural factors (Farrall & Bowling, 1999; Maruna & Mann, 2019).

Gender and Crime

Globally, prison populations remain overwhelmingly male, with approximately 93% of incarcerated individuals identifying as men (Clark, 2025; Department of Corrections, 2024; Korhonen, 2024). Despite a notable rise in women’s incarceration rates worldwide, this significant gender imbalance has contributed to a research landscape heavily focused on male experiences. In Aotearoa New Zealand, the influential Dunedin Multidisciplinary Health and Development Study extended its scope to incorporate female participants (Odgers et al., 2008). This expansion yielded crucial insights into gendered patterns of antisocial behaviour and criminality, revealing notable differences in both the prevalence of offending and developmental trajectories (Kratzer & Hodgins, 1999).

Research into female recidivism consistently reveals gendered patterns in both the nature and severity of offending. Giordano et al. (2002) investigated patterns of recidivism revealing relatively minor infractions associated with women compared to men. In more serious offences, women were generally found to occupy peripheral roles, with motives rooted in relational or emotive contexts distinct from those of men (Giordano et al., 2002). Consistent with this pattern, Moffitt et al. (2001) documented adolescent-limited antisocial behaviour among females was typically embedded within relationships with antisocial male partners.

Gendered aetiologies are further evidenced by research demonstrating strong links between women's experiences of victimisation and their offending behaviours. Comparative trauma data reveals that female offenders differ markedly from their male counterparts. Approximately 75% of women in prison report histories of sexual and/or family violence, compared with 56% of men. Likewise, 52% of women, relative to 22% of men, meet criteria for a lifetime diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder (Bevan, 2017).

More than two decades ago, Kathleen Daly's (1992) foundational work in the United States brought critical attention to the gendered dimensions of women's offending. Her pathways perspective has since gained significant traction within correctional theory and practice (Department of Corrections, 2021). This theoretical lens recognises that women's pathways into crime are often shaped by factors distinct from those of men, providing the basis for the development of gender-responsive (GR) assessment tools and interventions (Brennan et al., 2012).

Gender neutral approaches apply a universal risk/needs framework to both men and women, which focus on factors such as antisocial peers, criminal attitudes, substance abuse, education, employment, housing instability, and offending history (Andrews & Bonta, 2010). In contrast gender-responsive frameworks incorporate criminogenic and non-criminogenic factors which are particularly salient for women (Brennan et al., 2012). These factors include historical trauma and abuse, dysfunctional or dependent relationships, maternal responsibilities, mental health concerns such as depression and anxiety, and issues related to self-efficacy and relational identity (Brennan et al., 2012; Salisbury & Van Voorhis, 2009).

Sampson and Laub (2017) compared the early onset of offending across gender and found a markedly lower incidence of early delinquency among girls (6.2% of males compared with 0.4% of females), suggesting that females are less likely than males to exhibit childhood antisocial behaviours. According to Moffitt et al. (2001), only 1% of women meet

the criteria for persistent criminality, indicating that female offending trajectories rarely extend beyond the normative pattern of adolescent delinquency, as depicted by the age–crime curve. Compared with males, females are observed to exhibit fewer neurocognitive impairments, lower levels of under-controlled temperament, and reduced hyperactivity (Moffitt et al., 2001).

Such evidence suggests women are not inherently predisposed to criminality, rather their offending is relationally situated and contextually driven. The following section draws on existing literature to situate this research within the context of Aotearoa New Zealand, whereby a history of colonisation has produced systemic inequities within the criminal justice system.

Who are the women in Aotearoa New Zealand prisons?

This section situates women's imprisonment in Aotearoa New Zealand within the broader sociohistorical and structural context. It begins by examining how Māori came to be disproportionately represented in the criminal justice system through the colonial project, where law and policy were used to entrench structural disadvantage which persists today. The discussion then turns to female crime in Aotearoa New Zealand, presenting key statistics that highlight the scale of Māori overrepresentation in prison populations. These data also reveal the complex needs of incarcerated women, including high rates of poverty, limited educational attainment, mental health and substance use disorders, family violence, and intergenerational disadvantage. Finally, the section considers recidivism, drawing attention to the high rates of reimprisonment among women, particularly those with prior convictions, whereby the compounded pressures of reintegration are often found to perpetuate cycles of harm.

Colonisation & Māori imprisonment

The Treaty of Waitangi (1840) became a tool through which colonial power was solidified, further impinging the processes of dispossession and marginalisation of Māori. Discrepancies between English and te reo Māori versions became emblematic of the broader colonial strategy to dominate and remould the social and political fabric of Aotearoa New Zealand society (O' Malley, 2016). In 1840, the population of Aotearoa consisted of approximately 70,000 Māori compared to 2,000 permanent non-Māori residents. By the 1896 census, the non-Māori population had increased to 703,000, while the Māori population remained significantly less, at approximately 40,000 (Armstrong, 2016).

In asserting sovereignty over New Zealand, colonisers deployed a range of strategies including trade, resource extraction, missionary-led cultural encroachment, land confiscation, military intervention, and political control, aimed at assimilating Māori communities and criminalising their resistance (Walker, 2016). For Māori, the consequences were devastating. Māori experienced population decline, the undermining of chiefly authority, political marginalisation, widespread poverty, the erosion of language, identity, and culture (Walker, 2016). This historical process reinforced Pākehā domination and Māori subordination, with subsequent institutions perpetuating structural disadvantage (Walker, 2016).

Prior to European settlement, Māori were intricately connected to nature. Mountains, rivers, and lakes were central to their way of life (Armstrong, 2016). Māori women were essentially nurturers and organisers of whānau and hapū (Low, 2025) however this way of life was dismantled by the colonisers' agenda, driven by notions of racial and cultural superiority, aiming to convert Māori from what they perceived as barbarism to Christianity and "civilization" (Walker, 2016, p. 19). Colonisation led to a cultural dislocation for Māori, marked by significant grief and loss through death and separation.

Government policies were fundamentally rooted in the principle of assimilation, as evidenced by the Native Schools Act of 1867, which mandated that English be the sole language of instruction, both written and spoken (Armstrong, 2016). In 1847, the government offered subsidies for Māori to attend church boarding schools. These schools were designed to isolate Māori from the influences of their villages, deliberately excluding the Māori language and tikanga from the curriculum (Walker, 2016). The goal was to pacify and civilize, ultimately consigning Māori to a societal underclass (Walker, 2016).

In 1945, 75% of Māori resided in rural areas, a figure which dramatically declined to 18% by 1991 (Brittain & Tuffin, 2017). As Māori migrated to urban centres in search of work, the new education system steered Māori students toward manual and domestic labour, with very few progressing to secondary education (Bolton, 2017). The effects of urbanisation led to the erosion of Māori social and cultural foundations, triggering social inequities (Bolton, 2017). Māori faced discrimination both personally and systemically, leading to increased poverty and lower educational outcomes (Brittain & Tuffin, 2017). While the industrial economy relied heavily on Māori labour, the wages were barely sufficient for survival, and the jobs often led to long-term health issues (Bolton, 2017). As the European economy boomed, those with inferior educations, who never experienced the social benefits that education should provide, worked daily to ensure the success of the privileged and educated.

Central to the colonial project, law not only undermined indigenous methods of social control but also paved the way for the mass imprisonment of Māori (Workman, 2019). The British penal system, designed to create "good citizens" in the British mould, saw Māori as deficient by these standards and used incarceration as a tool to enforce compliance and assimilation (Walker, 2016). The colonial government passed laws which criminalised Māori efforts to defend their land and sovereignty. The Suppression of Rebellion Act 1863, for

instance, was a direct response to Māori resistance during the New Zealand land wars (Workman, 2019). It allowed the government to declare certain areas as being in a state of rebellion, suspending the right to a fair trial for those accused of participating in resistance activities. This law was used to justify the arrest and imprisonment of Māori without due process (Workman, 2019).

In the 19th century, Māori were not significantly represented in crime statistics, with Europeans comprising the majority of prisoners (Workman, 2019). In 1872, Māori accounted for only 2.3% of the prison population (Workman, 2019). However, as Māori society became increasingly fractured under the pressures of colonisation, the justice system began to target the most vulnerable members of Māori communities, including the homeless, intoxicated, and mentally ill (Workman, 2019). Over time, Māori came to be disproportionately represented in the criminal justice system, a trend which has persisted to this day.

NZ Female Crime Statistics

Women in prison tend to share a number of characteristics. They are a disadvantaged and marginalised population, one which is disproportionately drawn from the most deprived and marginalised sections of society (McIntosh, 2017).

One of the most widely cited statistics in Aotearoa New Zealand's criminal justice literature is the gross overrepresentation of Māori in prison. Only 15% of the general population in Aotearoa New Zealand are Māori, however Māori account for over 50% of the total prison population (Department of Corrections, 2021). This is a disparity which has persisted for decades, despite the wealth of research and policy attention. Māori comprise 61% of women currently held in New Zealand's prisons (Department of Corrections, 2024), remaining a significant troubling feature of Aotearoa New Zealand's criminal justice system, with far-reaching effects on the social fabric of the nation (Mihaere, 2015). McIntosh (2017) emphasises, the experience of incarceration is neither new nor unexpected for this population,

as it follows patterns observed within familial environments and communities over generations.

As of December 2024, there were 671 women incarcerated in Aotearoa New Zealand (Department of Corrections, 2024). This population carries a broad diversity in terms of ethnicity, age, religion, health status and cultural backgrounds. However, non-Māori are unlikely to carry the same weight of cultural dislocation, structural and institutional racism (Quince, 2007; Webb, 2011; McIntosh & Workman, 2017), and intergenerational marginalisation as their Māori peers.

Most women in prison in Aotearoa New Zealand are aged between 20 and 40, and nearly a quarter are linked to gangs. They tend to have lower levels of education, with 67% assessed as having literacy levels that would limit their ability to cope with daily life, and 74% demonstrating similarly low levels of numeracy (Department of Corrections, 2021). Many are mothers, with a recent study revealing 82% per cent of wāhine Māori leaving prison have more than one child (Thomas, 2025).

Research indicates that 62% of women in prison in Aotearoa New Zealand have experienced comorbid mental health and substance use disorders at some point in their lives (Indig et al., 2016). According to Morrison et al. (2021), 75% of women in prison have been subjected to family or sexual violence, and 52% are reported to suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder. Incarcerated women typically come from the most deprived sections of society, carrying the cumulative burden of intergenerational disadvantage (McIntosh, 2011). Furthermore, they are likely to be under or unemployed, recipients of state benefits, and disconnected from education systems (Bentley, 2014; McIntosh, 2011).

Many of these women were raised in compromised familial environments. Vulnerabilities were exacerbated by neoliberal policy reforms enacted in Aotearoa New Zealand during the 1980s and 1990s, which significantly reduced social welfare supports and

public housing provision (Low, 2025). In New Zealand, many vulnerable young people were placed into state care (government institutions). These environments were characterised by poor conditions, inadequate protection and serious physical, emotional, and sexual abuse (Stanley, 2016). As such, state care became a site of heightened institutional and systemic violence (Stanley, 2016; Low, 2025). According to the 1989 Roper Committee Report on New Zealand Prisons, a staggering 80% of incarcerated women had experienced sexual abuse prior to their imprisonment. Furthermore, almost 50% had endured severe parental abuse or neglect as cited by Goldingay (2007).

Recidivism

Recidivism is commonly defined as the recurrence of criminal behaviour, typically measured by reoffending following intervention or release (Mandel et al., 1965). It remains the dominant metric for evaluating the effectiveness of correctional programmes and policy responses (Solomon & Scherer, 2021). Yet behind this sterile statistic lies a deeper narrative, one of repeated cycles, missed opportunities, and lives entangled in the churn of the criminal justice system.

Based on prior patterns, around 33% of women released from prison in Aotearoa New Zealand are reimprisoned within two years, with this figure rising to 48% among those classified as recidivist (Department of Corrections, 2020a). Most female convictions are for non-violent offences, including theft, fraud, and drug-related crimes. Reimprisonment risk is significantly higher among women with multiple custodial sentences (Department of Corrections, 2020b). Women with prior incarcerations are two and a half times more likely to return to prison than first-time offenders and Māori women experience higher reconviction rates than their non-Māori peers (Nadesu, 2009).

Recent research by Low (2025), which examined women's experiences of recidivism in Aotearoa New Zealand, identified common situational risk factors which were shown to interact, such as relationship dysfunction, substance abuse, financial distress, and social

isolation. Low (2025) highlights prevalent reintegration challenges, including limited access to stable accommodation, ongoing financial hardship, and the re-emergence of antisocial peers. Traumatic events such as deaths, abusive relationships, and child custody issues were also identified in the literature as common factors leading to recidivist outcomes for women (Bevan, 2015).

While the preceding discussion highlights the structural and situational factors contributing to women's reoffending, it is equally important to consider the internal dimensions of change. The next section turns to the concept of identity to explore how personal, social, and role identities are continually negotiated and redefined.

Identity

Identity is broadly understood as an individual's self-definition, shaped through ongoing interaction between the self and the social world. In psychology, identity is often conceptualised as the coherent sense of self which integrates past experiences, present perceptions, and future aspirations (Erikson, 1968). In sociology, identity is understood as socially constructed through interaction, taking shape within systems of meaning, classification, and role expectations (Stryker & Burke, 2000). According to psychosocial theory, identity emerges through active exploration, commitment, and self-reflection (Erikson, 1968), integrating past experiences into a coherent sense of self which guides behaviour and decision-making (Marcia, 1966; Côté & Levine, 2014).

This study considers three distinguishable bases for identity inclusive of personal identity, social identity, and role identity. The study recognises in each, the reflexive nature of the self. Reflexivity can be understood as the capacity to (re)classify and (re)define oneself through relationships and social positions.

Personal Identity

Personal identity is the way an individual makes sense of who they are in this world (Erikson, 1968). Personal identity develops through self-definitions across domains including age, sex, gender, ethnicity, and relationship status (Waterman, 1999), combined with personality traits (Lounsbury et al., 2007), and is further shaped by the values and beliefs ascribed to these domains (Waterman, 1999). In this way, personal identity can be understood as both a product of self-evaluation and as an internal resource for navigating the external world.

Social Identity

Social identity describes how individuals locate themselves within a social category, where membership is determined by recognised criteria and members share defining attributes, values, or behaviours which distinguish them from other groups (Fearon, 1999). Across the life course individuals participate in a distinctive combination of social categories, with their sense of self emerging, in part, from the meanings and associations attached to these memberships (Stets & Burke, 2000). Inclusion within a social category may be based on cultural identity, political affiliation, religion, or community membership, each of which inherently links social identity to a sense of belonging (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Social Identity Theory (SIT) identifies two core processes (depersonalisation and self-esteem) which arise once an identity is activated. Depersonalisation occurs when individuals identify themselves less by their personal beliefs and more by the shared norms and values of the group to which they belong (Stets & Burke, 2000). Within the context of desistance, this process is significant because perceptions and decision-making become guided by what “we” think rather than what “I” think. Depersonalisation can therefore be either beneficial, when the group promotes prosocial values or self-sacrificing when the social identity is tied to maladaptive norms.

Role Identity

Role identity refers to the set of internalised meanings attached to the roles individuals occupy within a social structure, whether in the private sphere of the home or in broader society (Stets & Serpe, 2013). Roles themselves are the shared expectations and behavioural norms associated with particular social positions, such as worker, mother, or student. For example, the role of worker typically carries expectations of reliability, competence, and adherence to organisational rules. A role identity emerges when an individual integrates these expectations into their self-concept, attaching personal meaning to the position they hold (Stets & Serpe, 2013). Adopting a worker role identity might involve seeing oneself as responsible or committed, with this self-definition enacted through behaviours such as arriving on time, completing tasks to a high standard, and cooperating with colleagues. Importantly, fulfilling role-based expectations reinforces one's legitimacy within that role and strengthens the associated identity (Stets & Burke, 2000). In the context of desistance, adopting and sustaining prosocial role identities can help to stabilise behavioural change and support the reconstruction of a non-offending self.

Identity processes

Understanding how identities are maintained and reinforced requires examining the social processes which support them. In Identity Theory (IT), the reflexive process is termed 'identification', through which the self is defined in relation to specific social roles (Stets & Burke, 2000). In Social Identity Theory (SIT), a comparable process is referred to 'self-categorisation', whereby individuals locate themselves within social categories based on perceived similarities and differences (Stets & Burke, 2000). Whilst the terminology differs, both frameworks describe how individuals internalise these classifications, which in turn guide behaviour, shape social interaction, and influence self-perception.

Identity Theory emphasises mechanisms such as ‘identity verification,’ ‘reflected appraisals,’ and ‘identity salience’ to explain how identities are reinforced (Stets & Serpe, 2013). These processes are particularly relevant to desistance, where sustaining a prosocial identity often depends on ongoing social recognition and validation.

Identity verification occurs when individuals perceive that others view them in ways consistent with their own self-conceptions (Stets & Serpe, 2013). In desistance from crime, this typically means that the ‘changed self’ an individual strives to enact is acknowledged and affirmed by others. The evaluative feedback individuals receive, often conceptualised as reflected appraisals, becomes a crucial source of reinforcement, signalling whether the new identity is being accepted within valued social circles (Stets & Serpe, 2013).

Finally, identity salience refers to the relative importance of a given identity to the self, reflected in its likelihood to be enacted across different contexts (Stets & Serpe, 2013). In terms of desisting from crime, identity salience is amplified when prosocial identities (such as reliable employee or responsible parent) are consistently validated by others. As these identities gain social recognition, they become increasingly central to the individual’s self-concept, thereby consolidating the commitment to a prosocial identity.

Chapter Two: Desistance Theories of Crime

It is important to recognise the constellation of interrelated factors essential to desistance from crime. Distinguishing between primary, secondary, and tertiary desistance is useful to illustrate the intersection of structure and agency across the processes of change. Primary desistance refers to an initial period of abstaining from criminal activity, often initiated by a disruption to routine patterns (Patton & Farrall, 2021). Secondary desistance involves an internal shift, wherein the individual begins to reconceptualise their identity (Giordano et al., 2002; Maruna et al., 2004; Paternoster & Bushway, 2009). While this process is self-determined, it is contingent on the ability to adopt socially constructive labels (McNeill, 2006). Tertiary desistance highlights the importance of relational recognition. It is concerned not only with individual transformation but with being acknowledged as changed by others and attaining a sense of meaningful social belonging (McNeil, 2015).

This chapter examines two key theoretical perspectives on desistance: (a) ontogenic and (b) sociogenic. It traces the evolution of desistance theory from early ontogenic explanations, which emphasise ageing and maturation, to sociogenic accounts which foreground the role of social bonds, structural conditions, and life-course processes in shaping pathways away from crime.

Ontogenic Perspectives

Ontogenic desistance theories emphasise the age crime curve, which demonstrates that offending behaviour typically peaks during adolescence and declines markedly after the age of 30 (Uggen, 2000; Laub & Sampson, 2001; Graham & McNeil, 2017). This decline is explained as a product of maturation, where reductions in impulsivity and the development of greater self-control contribute to the natural cessation of offending (Hirschi & Gottfredson, 1983; Laub & Sampson, 2001).

Desistance research initially focused on adolescent male populations, with some of the earliest empirical insights emerging from longitudinal studies. A foundational example is the work of Glueck and Glueck (1950), who followed a cohort of 500 delinquent boys in Boston into adulthood. Their pioneering research revealed a general trend of individuals gradually maturing out of crime. Fourteen years later, Matza (1964) introduced a sociological perspective through his theory of drift, conceptualising early offending as a transitory and episodic phase, rather than a stable identity. Expanding on these early contributions, Moffitt (1993) developed the influential Dual Taxonomy of Antisocial Behaviour, drawing from comprehensive data collected by the Dunedin Study, an ongoing longitudinal birth cohort investigation linking childhood adversity to lifelong health and behavioural outcomes.

As a result of the aforementioned study, Moffitt (1993) distinguishes between two developmental trajectories, adolescence-limited (AL) and life-course persistent (LCP). Findings revealed AL offenders typically begin engaging in antisocial behaviour during adolescence, which subsequently declines as they transition into adulthood. In contrast, LCP offenders exhibit early onset and persistent antisocial behaviour which continues across the life span (Moffitt, 1993).

Further to this, Moffitt (1993) extended her analysis beyond behavioural patterns to examine the developmental origins of antisocial behaviour. She found that adolescence-limited offenders typically emerge from normative developmental environments. However, their desistance can be delayed by 'snares' such as criminal records and substance dependence, which hinder successful transitions into conventional adult roles. In contrast, the developmental pathway of life course persistent offenders is characterised by early behavioural problems, often compounded by neuropsychological deficits and adverse socio-environmental conditions, including poverty, exposure to violence, and familial instability (Moffitt, 1993; 2007). LCP individuals are more likely to experience cumulative

disadvantage, which impedes access to prosocial opportunities and reinforces patterns of antisocial behaviour. Moffitt and colleagues (2001) argue that LCP trajectories often originate from inherited or acquired neurodevelopmental vulnerabilities, which become entrenched in early life and are empirically evident within the first three decades (Moffitt, 2007). The notion of maturing out of crime is supported by Bersani & Doherty (2018) who contend eventual desistance from crime is normative, even among those characterised as high-rate, chronic offenders.

Hirschi and Gottfredson (1983) offer a maturational perspective by linking age-related declines in offending to the development of self-control. The General Theory of Crime argues “crime declines with age. Spontaneous desistance is just that, change in behaviour that cannot be explained and change that occurs regardless of what else happens” (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990, p. 140). While their account emphasises the inevitable nature of desistance, more recent studies have demonstrated variability in the onset and duration of offending across different cultural contexts (Bevan, 2015). A study carried out by Shover (1996) suggests that as individuals grow older, their fear of doing more time intensifies. This indicates that aging offenders may become increasingly concerned about the consequences of incarceration, particularly the prospect of spending a significant portion of their remaining life in prison. This fear may intensify with age as individuals contemplate declining health, increased vulnerability, and the prospect of long-term incarceration, highlighting the significant personal and social consequences at stake and potentially influencing the decision to desist.

Although maturation perspectives are supported by a substantial body of evidence, ontogenic accounts of desistance have been criticised for their deterministic orientation. These accounts attribute crime cessation to the natural progression of ageing, psychosocial development, and cognitive maturity, framing desistance as an outcome of individual

development rather than a negotiated process. While such explanations capture observable patterns in criminal careers, they risk oversimplification by neglecting the broader social and structural contexts within which change occurs. Critics argue that this omission neglects to recognise the influence of external factors, such as access to employment, supportive relationships, and community resources in the desistance process (Laub & Sampson, 2001; Graham & McNeill, 2017). Taken in isolation, ontogenic approaches risk overlooking the complexity of desistance as an interaction of personal, relational, and structural conditions.

Sociogenic Perspectives

Building on ontogenic perspectives, this section examines theories which emphasise the influence of social structures across adult development and life courses. Sociogenic perspectives conceptualise desistance as a social process, shaped by relational supports, and structural opportunities. Sociogenic theorists contend that individuals desist not only through personal decision-making but as a process facilitated by their social environments (Sampson & Laub, 1993; Maruna, 2001; Graham & McNeill, 2017). To explore this further, the discussion focuses on two key processes. The first process, secondary desistance, centres on the transformation of identity. The second process, tertiary desistance, captures the relational dimension of change, through which social recognition and a sense of belonging occur. Together they offer a deeper understanding of how individual change is supported and sustained through both identity work and social inclusion.

Secondary Desistance

Life Course Theory.

The Age-Graded Theory of Informal Social Control provides a foundational framework for understanding adult desistance from crime (Sampson & Laub, 1993). Emerging from their longitudinal reanalysis of the Glueck's (1950) study, this theory proposes that salient life events can redirect criminal trajectories established during

delinquent years. The theory rejects the idea of criminality as fixed, proposing instead that desistance can occur at any stage of the life course through investment in prosocial relationships and institutions (Laub & Sampson, 2001; Jasni et al., 2023). Recognising both continuity and change in offending behaviour, this perspective argues that secondary desistance occurs when ‘turning points’ create pathways for behavioural transformation (Sampson & Laub, 1993. p. 304).

A core theoretical concept is that informal social control operates through the cumulative effect of adult social bonds (Sampson & Laub, 2017). These bonds serve to reorient individuals toward law-abiding lifestyles by investing them in conventional roles and expectations. Importantly, Sampson and Laub (1993) stress, it is the quality of these relationships which matter more than the timing. While many criminological theories emphasise the onset of antisocial behaviour in youth, age-graded theory asserts that meaningful change can be catalysed later in life. They claim that “change appears to be systematically structured by adult bonds to social institutions” (Sampson & Laub, 2007, p. 625), signalling a more flexible and hopeful view of desistance than deterministic accounts based solely on early life experiences.

A key contribution of this framework is the concept of ‘turning points’ which redirect an individual's life course, offering the potential for lasting change (Sampson & Laub, 1993. p. 304). Examples include beginning a stable job, entering a committed relationship, or assuming parental responsibilities. These events are thought to disrupt criminal trajectories by introducing new routines, sources of social support, and obligations which reinforce prosocial identities (Sampson & Laub, 1993). Turning points are not deterministic in themselves, but rather provide structural and relational context within which self-determined personal transformation can emerge (Laub & Sampson, 2001).

The age-graded theory of informal social control draws upon broader life-course principles, particularly the idea that trajectories can be modified through exposure to new social environments (Sampson & Laub, 1993). This is particularly relevant when discussing how adult social institutions, such as work, family and social support can serve as a mechanism for accountability and positive change. Institutions generate social capital, defined as the resources and obligations embedded within relationships, which constrain deviant behaviour by increasing the costs of offending and reinforcing conformity.

Sampson and Laub (2007) provide empirical support for the relationship between meaningful social ties and desistance. Their research shows that adult social bonds are not only associated with reductions in criminal behaviour but also with transformative identity shifts. For example, employment can function as a mechanism of informal social control by restructuring routine activities, enhancing daily accountability, and creating a sense of responsibility. These processes contribute to ‘desistance by default,’ an often unintentional shift toward conformity.

While employment and marriage are frequently cited as stabilising forces, Sampson & Laub (2007) are careful to note that it is the integrity within these relationships, not merely their existence, which produces change. In their 2007 study, they found that “job stability has the largest effect on the most precise estimate of crime” (p. 620) among individuals aged 25 to 32, but they caution against assuming that all forms of employment or marriage are equally effective. “The results suggest that it is cohesiveness that is central rather than marriage per se” (p. 620). This aspect is important, as it positions desistance not as a consequence of status change alone but shaped by the quality of the relationship.

Laub and Sampson (2001) emphasise the cumulative nature of desistance, a perspective which aligns with findings from contemporary desistance scholars such as Bersani and Doherty (2018) and Weaver (2019) who also emphasise the importance of sustained,

incremental change. In this sense, the theory provides a bridge between structural and subjective accounts of desistance. It acknowledges the importance of external supports such as family, employment and institutions, while also recognising the role of individual agency.

Life Course theory's emphasis on routine and accountability also aligns with symbolic interactionist accounts, which argue that desistance is tied to the adoption of a new self-identity (Giordano et al., 2002). While Laub and Sampson (2001) do not frame their theory in symbolic interactionist terms, their findings support the view that desistance involves a redefinition of the self in relation to others. As individuals commit to conventional roles, they begin to see themselves, and are seen by others, as different from who they once were.

Importantly, Sampson and Laub (2017) also underscore the limits of structural supports alone. While parenting and employment may provide the conditions for desistance, they are insufficient in isolation. Echoing Elder's (1994) observations on life-course transitions, Sampson and Laub (2017) argue that turning points require commitment and that the effectiveness is contingent on individual willingness to adapt to new roles and expectations. This reinforces the notion that desistance is an interrelation of structure and agency, a perspective which has gained traction in contemporary criminology.

Identity Theories

The previous chapter (see Chapter One: Identity) examined identity formation and its relevance to the desistance process. Maruna's (2001) Making Good study uncovered narratives which active and ex-offenders attach to their experiences. His identity centred explanations for desistance asserts that "making good is the wilful cognitive distortion that aligns the past with the present" (Maruna, 2001, p. 9). In other words, desisters intentionally reframe their pasts in a way which fits with a newly adopted identity, thus making sense of who they are now by reinterpreting who they were then. This process is not necessarily a

complete identity transformation, instead, it represents a coherent understanding which makes internal conflicts explicable within a 'good person' narrative.

Maruna's (2001) research findings revealed that individuals trapped in the cycle of offending often attributed their criminality to structural factors such as poverty, stigma and low self-efficacy. Their narratives tended to externalise blame and reinforce hopelessness and a lack of opportunity. In contrast, desisters were found to share narratives of taking responsibility and redefining themselves (Maruna, 2001). Many desisters mentioned the process of going from bad to good, involved learning from their pasts, relinquishing their old selves, and constructing new plans (Maruna, 2001). They reported generative pursuits as instrumental to desistance, often taking on positive roles such as counselling, volunteering, youth work, or supporting others on community sentences (Maruna, 2001).

Cognitive transformation theory (Giordano et al., 2002) has strong links to a symbolic interactionist perspective, with a focus on identity change. Symbolic interactionism recognises that desistance requires a shift in perspective, one that involves adjusting beliefs, which are not necessarily tied to criminal conduct. Central to this theory is the notion that individuals assign fluid and subjective meanings to their experiences, acknowledging the existence of multiple realities. This makes it a particularly valuable framework for understanding why persistent offending may continue even when conventional opportunities, such as employment, are available (Giordano et al., 2002). Giordano et al., (2002) present a more structured model of desistance, outlining a four-stage process of identity change. The first stage, "openness to change", involves a cognitive readiness to explore alternatives to crime (p. 1027). The second stage, "hooks" for change, reflects an individual's receptiveness to engage with prosocial opportunities (p. 1027). The third stage involves an "identity shift," (p. 1031) characterised by the development of a new self-concept. Finally, the fourth stage

proposes a change in the “desirability” of offending behaviour, as new values and priorities render previous behaviours incompatible with the emerging self (p.992).

Cognitive transformation theory maps desistance as a gradual, nonlinear process, which acknowledges the inevitability of obstacles along the way. This perspective maintains that setbacks are not indicators of failure (Giordano et al., 2002), a view which is supported by Solomon and Scherer (2021), whose research frames regressions as integral to the desistance process.

“Hooks for change” are a salient feature of this theory as these hooks do not in themselves guarantee desistance (Giordano et al., 2002. p. 1027). Rather, the individual exercises agency in selectively engaging with and assigning meaning to them. While hooks can act as catalysts for change, their effectiveness depends on a corresponding identity shift which enables the individual to perceive hooks as valuable and relevant (Giordano et al., 2002).

Critically, this framework recognises that some individuals are capable of redirecting their lives even in the absence of traditional supports or resources, drawing attention to the significance of internal cognitive processes for activating change (Giordano et al., 2002). At the same time, it acknowledges the individualised nature of desistance, contending that genuine efforts to change may falter when access to social capital and resources are limited (Giordano, 2022).

Recognising the limitations of their earlier sequential model, Giordano (2022) revised their theory to better account for the dynamic nature of desistance. Their updated framework integrates subjectivity and adopts a more cyclical view of identity transformation (Giordano, 2022). Further research found that openness to change does not always precede other shifts. For many, especially those with histories of substance use, a change in the desirability of offending behaviour often came first (Giordano, 2022). This revised model recognises the

interaction of emotions, thoughts, and behaviour as a dynamic triangle, acknowledging that identity work is not only cognitive but also subjective (Giordano, 2022). Cognitive transformation theory remains consistent with symbolic interactionist versions of social learning theory, which consider how internal thought processes are shaped through social interaction (Bandura, 1969), which aligns with Identity Theory.

Identity theory of desistance emphasises agency and internal motivation, framing desistance as the product of deliberate self-assessment and future planning (Paternoster & Bushway, 2009). This theory asserts that desistance is precipitated by a “crystallisation of discontent,” where accumulated failures and dissatisfactions lead individuals to confront a “feared self” (Paternoster & Bushway, 2009. p. 1103). The recognition of a negative future in the making marks the beginning of an identity process. According to this framework, offenders evaluate the costs and benefits of maintaining their criminal identity, versus adopting a law-abiding one (Paternoster & Bushway, 2009). The ‘working self’ refers to an individual's active, current sense of self, shaped by their immediate circumstances, roles, and perceived capabilities (Paternoster & Bushway, 2009. p. 1103). It represents who a person believes they are in the present, drawing on both enduring traits and situational self-knowledge. For example, someone might simultaneously see themselves as a mother, a person with limited education, a drug dealer, and someone with a strong loyalty to their criminal associates. While not all aspects of the self are equally salient at any given time, some may function as core beliefs which guide behaviour. Importantly, the “working self” is also attuned to one’s perceived skills and limitations, informing what a person believes they can or cannot do in a given context (Paternoster & Bushway, 2009. p. 1103). The ‘possible self’ represents an individual’s imagined future identity (p. 1103). It is a forward-facing sense of self which includes envisioned goals, desired outcomes, and a roadmap for how these may be achieved. This self-concept can be defined positively as the person one hopes to

become (e.g., a present parent, a reliable employee) or negatively, as the person one fears becoming (e.g., an unemployed addict or someone destined to spend a lifetime behind bars). It consists of personal ambitions, anxieties, and expectations, and reflects an awareness of what is realistically attainable or at risk, both good and bad (Paternoster & Bushway, 2009). While the possible self serves as a motivational guide for behavioural change, it is also constrained by social context. As such, the possible self is shaped not only by internal desires but also by the structural realities which influence whether envisioned futures feel possible or out of reach (Paternoster & Bushway, 2009).

According to identity theory of desistance, a self-regulatory mechanism compares past and future identities to chart a pathway forward (Paternoster & Bushway, 2009). The individual assesses and plans how to narrow the gap between who they are and who they want to become. This framework emphasises that no meaningful engagement with structural supports can occur unless an identity shift has already taken place (Paternoster & Bushway, 2009). Furthermore, when one's identity has changed there is an observable severing of the past and an internal shift of priorities rendering things that once held significance as no longer important, while previously overlooked aspects of life take on greater meaning (Paternoster & Bushway, 2009).

When comparing cognitive transformation theory (Giordano et al., 2002), with identity theory of desistance (Paternoster & Bushway, 2009), cognitive transformation theory conceptualises desistance as a cyclical and time-consuming process, whereas the identity theory presents a more linear model centred on internal deliberation and decisive self-redefinition. Critics argue that this latter perspective can understate the continued influence of social and structural barriers (McNeill, 2006; Weaver, 2019), yet it remains valuable for emphasising the self-determined and agentic nature of identity change.

Collectively, the aforementioned theories emphasise that identity is not fixed but reflexive, interpretative, and responsive to both internal and external influences. Desistance is not simply about abandoning crime, it is about reconstructing the self in relation to past experiences, current capacities, and future aspirations.

Tertiary Desistance

This section broadens the literature review by examining tertiary desistance as a relational process. Tertiary desistance situates desistance from crime within the wider social sphere, where identity change is consolidated through social acceptance and inclusion. Scholars distinguish between relational and tertiary desistance. The former emphasises interpersonal recognition and the role of supportive relationships in sustaining change (Nugent & Schinkel, 2016), while the latter extends this logic to the societal level, capturing how structural acceptance and social inclusion reinforce a non-offending identity (McNeill, 2016). Although these dimensions are often discussed separately, this section considers them together to highlight the interconnected ways in which meaningful relationships, alongside broader social structures shape desistance.

To capture the multidimensional nature of tertiary desistance, the review considers three interrelated sets of social influences. Micro influences draw attention to interactions with the closest relational proximity such as children, family members, and spouses, where intimate bonds can reinforce or undermine desistance (Härkönen, 2001; Patton & Farrall, 2021). Meso influences encompass community contexts, including vocational and social networks, which provide or withhold the social capital necessary to sustain change (Patton & Farrall, 2021). Finally, macro influences address broader institutional dynamics, including government and policy, which shape the possibilities and constraints for recognition as a reformed citizen with equal rights (Patton & Farrall, 2021).

Tertiary desistance refers to the “sphere” of desistance (Nugent & Schinkel, 2016. p. 568) in which individuals not only see themselves differently but are also recognised and accepted by others as changed people. Belonging is not merely an emotional state, but an inherently relational experience shaped by an individual’s structural and social realities. While tertiary desistance can be facilitated through employment, family roles, or community involvement and it can equally be prevented by persistent stigma and social exclusion (Bevan, 2015). For many desisters, the journey toward belonging involves negotiating their identities within constrained social spaces which may continue to see them through the lens of their criminal past. The way an individual behaves is closely tied to how they see themselves, which is largely shaped by how they know they are to be perceived by others (Nugent & Schinkel, 2016).

It is important to note that tertiary (relational) desistance is complicated by the ways in which individuals move between being discreditable, discredited, and accepted, depending on how they manage impressions (Yang et al., 2007). Goffman’s (2009) theory of stigma offers valuable insight here, illustrating how those with criminal records are frequently reduced to “tainted identities,” a process which can foster the internalisation of negative labels (p. 131).

Micro influences.

At the micro level, relational desistance unfolds in close relationships, particularly those involving family members, romantic partners, and children (Patton & Farrall, 2021). Research shows that for many women, desistance is less about formal institutional change such as prison or programmes and more about relational repair, healing from trauma, and repositioning their moral compass (Giordano et al., 2002; McIvor & Raynor, 2007). Research findings reveal the significance of support and recognition from children and families on

meaningful change, whilst emphasising the ambivalent nature of familial environments which can simultaneously offer care and act as a source of trauma (Low, 2024).

Unlike men, whose desistance is often stabilised through the formation of intimate partnerships (Sampson & Laub, 1993), women are more likely to have experienced harm within such relationships, particularly when partners are themselves involved in crime or abusive behaviour. For many women, these intimate relationships are not protective but criminogenic, contributing to cycles of offending, substance use, and trauma (McIvor et al., 2009; Giordano et al., 2002). As a result, ending a harmful or controlling relationship can serve as a more critical turning point in the desistance process than forming a new one (Simons & Barr, 2014; Haynie et al., 2005).

Parenthood also holds micro-level significance. It can offer a route to adopt a positive identity (Sullivan, 2012) and re-engage with familial and social networks (Brown & Bloom, 2009). However, the effectiveness of this role is moderated by factors such as socio-economic status, relationship quality, and cultural expectations (Giordano et al., 2011; Calverley, 2012). While some women find strength in motherhood, others experience it as a strain, especially when lacking adequate support (McIvor et al., 2009).

Meso influences.

Community acceptance or the lack of, plays a crucial role in desistance. Research suggests that trust and recognition support sustained desistance, however this is dependent on the quality of the community (Bevan, 2015).

Research by Cobbina (2009) highlights the significance of the “people, places, and things” strategy as a common approach among women seeking to maintain desistance (p. 288). While some women replaced all three components in relation to their former criminal lifestyle, others report simply eliminating negative associates to facilitate their exit from crime (Cobbina, 2009). Cobbina (2009) found that approximately 27% of participants used

social avoidance strategies to distance themselves from peers considered high-risk. While this approach was grounded in what one would assume to be sensible decision-making to avoid a criminal relapse, a tension was noted within this strategy. The study found while avoidance may offer short-term protection, it can also lead to increased feelings of loneliness and disconnection. For women who failed to replace negative peer networks with positive, prosocial relationships, the lack of meaningful connection left them at risk of reverting to old behaviours (Cobbina, 2009).

Social links to community and wider society help individuals perform and affirm their new identities via a co-produced desistance process of personal intention and social response (Nugent & Schinkel, 2016). Four elements are recognised to shape one's relationship with society including attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief (Hirschi, 1969). Furthermore, belief in the legitimacy of societal rules and norms provides a moral framework which reinforces law-abiding behaviour (Hirschi, 1969).

The aforementioned dynamics are described by Weaver and McNeill (2015) as the concept of "relational reflexivity" (p. 4), which captures how individuals adjust their behaviour to maintain valued social connections. At a meso level, education and training are found to facilitate the growth of social capital, supporting individuals to enter new societal roles through connection and contribution (Calverley, 2012). While theorists argue that employment supports desistance when it generates a sense of fulfilment (Farrall 2004; Sampson & Laub, 1993), employment is not always prioritised, especially by women with childcare responsibilities (Low, 2024). Despite meso-level relational desistance being a key part of the process for some individuals, access to supportive relationships is often constrained by significant barriers based on multiple sites of inequality (Low, 2024). Employment is typically governed by structural forces beyond the individual or workplace. Hiring practices, criminal record disclosures, and systemic discrimination, particularly

against Māori and other marginalised ethnic groups, determines who gets recognised as employable (Low, 2024).

Macro factors.

Macro level influences often challenge tertiary desistance, as institutional, legal and cultural forces are less likely to validate individual change (Low, 2024). These influences include access to housing, employment policies, and societal attitudes toward criminalised individuals. Exclusionary housing criteria exemplify a macro-level barrier. As noted by Low and Mills (2025), without stable housing many women become entrenched “in the scene” (p. 26), unable to distance themselves from criminogenic environments.

Relational desistance at the macro level depends on the restoration of civic rights and responsibilities, however external validation is unevenly distributed. Intersectional disadvantages linked to race, class, and gender tend to determine who is seen as deserving of a second chance (Calverley, 2012; Carlton & Segrave, 2016). Goffman’s (2009) work on stigma remains salient here, illustrating how societal labelling practices continue to frame ex-offenders as deviant.

Summary

By distinguishing between primary, secondary, and tertiary desistance, the chapter provides an overview of theoretical perspectives on desistance from crime, further illustrating the connection between identity transformation and social reintegration across stages of the desistance journey. Ontogenic perspectives offer valuable insight into normative patterns of maturation and ageing out of crime, however their deterministic orientation is limited in explaining women’s pathways, particularly where early childhood adversity, trauma, and cumulative disadvantage constrain access to prosocial turning points. Sociogenic and

identity-based theories extend our understanding by situating desistance within social relationships, institutional structures, and subjective processes of meaning-making.

Identity-focused frameworks, including Maruna's (2001) narrative theory, Giordano et al.'s (2002) cognitive transformation model, and Paternoster and Bushway's (2009) identity theory, collectively explain the mechanisms through which desisters alter their self-concept to establish lives beyond crime. The chapter has shown that identity change alone is insufficient without relational validation and structural inclusion. Tertiary desistance foregrounds the importance of belonging, recognition, and social acceptance, drawing attention to the ways stigma, exclusion, and institutional barriers can undermine sustained change, particularly for women navigating intersecting inequalities. Together, these theoretical perspectives provide a nuanced lens through which women's desistance can be understood as an ongoing negotiation between personal transformation and social response. This framework informs the analysis of the women's narratives in subsequent chapters, grounding their lived experiences within an integrated theoretical foundation.

Chapter Three: Methodology

The following chapter outlines the methodological framework underpinning the study and is organised into seven sections. It begins by situating my positionality as a researcher, drawing on lived experience of incarceration and reflecting on how this informed the research design and relational ethics of the study. The chapter then details the recruitment process, which was distinctive in its use of purposive sampling informed by members of the formerly incarcerated community. Participant characteristics are presented before ethical considerations are discussed. The chapter proceeds to describe the qualitative research design, including the use of semi-structured interviews as the primary method of data collection, chosen to illuminate the diverse ways in which change, and desistance are experienced. Data collection and analysis processes are then outlined. The chapter concludes by introducing the women whose stories form the foundation of this research.

Positionality

I arrive at this research straddling two worlds, one marked by inquiry as a researcher and another as someone who has departed a life I once perceived as inescapable insanity. Being entangled in patterns I could not unravel terrified me as I sat alone, sentenced to double digits. What I discovered behind the wire, challenged everything I thought I knew about prisoners. I had never expected to find so much nurturing in a space built on punishment.

I became acutely aware of the wide variation in how individuals impacted by the criminal justice system interpret and respond to seemingly similar conditions. Having lived tightly within a prison community experiencing both the ongoing impacts of trauma and intermittent access to support and opportunity, I came to recognise the contrasting realities which existed within our shared environment. Together, we often marvelled at how the unique contours of our childhoods shaped the lenses through which we viewed the world.

I carry a long-term commitment to supporting positive outcomes for justice-impacted women, which has been strengthened by my role with a charitable organisation. Reclaim Another Woman (RAW) remains dedicated, after a decade of aiding reintegration, to supporting women in leading meaningful lives after prison. RAW operates in partnership with a diverse range of stakeholders, including local iwi Ngāti Tumutumu, Waikato Women's Refuge, the Department of Corrections, and various organisations across the health and education sectors.

As a RAW advisory group and Governance Board member, I engage with this research through a constellation of lenses. The mentor space I occupy demands a careful balance of encouraging without pressuring, inspiring without alienating, and listening closely to the detail of what is being shared. As a governance board member, I am situated not only as an advocate but also as a reflective practitioner and learner, engaged in the observation of systemic developments and the evolving landscape of social policy. With this comes intersecting responsibilities to consider and communicate the perspectives of diverse system users, acknowledging the complex and varied needs of the population we seek to support. Furthermore, the space I occupy within the RAW alumni is grounded in a culture of belief in change, where women empower women and walk alongside one another.

As a Pākehā researching desistance journeys in Aotearoa, I approach this project with acute awareness of what has eventuated before me. I acknowledge that this work exists within a context where Māori have been over-researched through Western frameworks which have often misrepresented, marginalised, and pathologised Māori people and knowledge systems (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012). Furthermore, the institutional spaces this project speaks into, particularly the criminal justice system, remain disproportionately populated by Māori (Department of Corrections, 2022), reflecting the ongoing consequences of colonisation, systemic inequity, and intergenerational trauma. I recognise that research discourse has the

power to either reinforce inequitable systems or challenge them, which reinforces my commitment to avoid colonial patterns and ensure that Māori ways of being and relating are respected rather than sidelined.

Generational awareness brings a sense of tension humbling me as a researcher, with the recognition that whilst gaining valuable insights there is a rapidly changing demographic. The cohort involved in this study lived through a period marked by the emergence and intensification of organised crime, gang affiliation, and widespread methamphetamine use in Aotearoa New Zealand (Savage, 2020; Gilbert, 2013; Collins, 2023). We were exposed to belief systems which normalised silence and suppressed vulnerability. In many respects the stories in this study represent the final wave of a generation affected by older justice system models which were predominantly punitive, and deficit based.

I do not claim neutrality in this work, I am deeply invested. However, my investment is neither in uncritically upholding existing systems nor in dismantling them for the sake of opposition. Rather, it lies in shading the landscape of desistance for women in Aotearoa, disrupting what no longer serves those most affected and in advocating for what might.

Recruitment Process

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to recruit women whose life experiences aligned with the aims of the study. Purposive sampling involves selecting individuals who are particularly knowledgeable about the topic (Curtis & Curtis, 2011). An informal introduction to the study was circulated via word of mouth within the formerly incarcerated community, where shared knowledge about who was perceived to be “doing well” in their desistance journey was commonly exchanged. As part of this relational network, peers offered suggestions and provided email addresses for women they believed might be interested and eligible to participate. I initiated contact with potential participants through a brief and informal email which briefly outlined the study and invited them to

respond if they would like to participate. This approach was carefully chosen to reflect and honour the relational dynamics of the community, while upholding ethical standards of autonomy and voluntary engagement.

Individuals who expressed their interest were emailed the participant information sheet (see Appendix A), outlining the aims of the research, the nature of participation, and the ethical safeguards in place. They were invited to read the material carefully and to request a consent form if they wished to proceed. This staged process was intentionally designed to avoid assumptions of consent and to reinforce participants' agency in deciding whether or not to take part.

Participant Data

The interview data presented draws on narrative interviews conducted with twelve formerly incarcerated women in Aotearoa New Zealand. Of the twelve participants, five identified as NZ/Māori (41.6%), one as European/Māori (8.3%), one as Australian/Māori (8.3%) and five as NZ/European (41.6%). Inclusion criteria required participants to identify as female, have experienced more than one term of incarceration, and have been released from prison for at least one year. In addition, participants needed to self-identify as having previously experienced a criminal lifestyle.

Participants were recruited through personal contacts, as discussed in more detail above (see Recruitment Process). The interviews were conducted over a three-month period during the first half of 2025, with participants located from Kaitia to Christchurch. Ten interviews were conducted face-to-face in locations selected by participants, including cafés, workplaces, parks, and private homes. Two interviews were conducted virtually to accommodate geographic or logistical constraints. Each interview ranged in duration from 90 to 120 minutes.

At the time of the interview, participants were aged between 33 and 57 years with an average age of 46.5 years. Time since last offence ranged significantly across the sample. Three women had remained offence free for 12-13yrs, four women for 7-9yrs, three women for 4 years and two women had been offence free for one year. Offence types included fraud, robbery, theft, Class A drug dealing, and attempted murder. The majority of participants (n = 10) had been convicted of offences carrying penalties of two years' imprisonment or more, and two had offences with a maximum sentence of less than two years. All twelve women reported histories of drug addiction. Half of the participants (n = 6) received their first conviction between the ages of 13 and 18, three women were first convicted at age 21, and the remaining three between 35 and 38 years of age. Regarding the onset of their criminal lifestyles, six participants (50%) self-reported initially offending between the ages of 13 and 16, four (33%) between 18 and 23, one at age 27, and one at age 33. Across the sample, the average reported age of onset was 19.5 years.

According to self-reported data, 66% (n = 8) of participants committed their last offence between the ages of 36 and 45, while the remaining 33% (n = 4) committed their last offence between 25 and 29 years. The average age at which participants self-reported to cease antisocial behaviour was 35.9 years.

Narrative data revealed that 75% of the women were engaged in paid employment at the time of interview. Roles included beauty technician, groundskeeper, dog caregiver, social worker, café or restaurant manager, and personal trainer. Additionally, of the 12 women three women (25%) were business owners, and another three (25%) were receiving social welfare support.

Ethical Concerns

The initial ethical issue to arise was amplified by my insider status. Being a member of the formerly incarcerated community posed a heightened risk of coercion in terms of

participants feeling sense of obligation to take part in the study out of loyalty or perceived expectation. A deliberately phased recruitment process was adopted to mitigate this risk (see Data Collection). Of the 17 women informally approached about the study, one woman declined to participate, explaining that she believed in the value of this study however she had taken part in several “lifer” studies over the years and was fatigued by the feeling of being reduced to a statistic. Another woman responded to express her support for the kaupapa but indicated she was unavailable due to the demands of a new role. A third responded positively however neglected to offer interview availability, and no further follow-up was initiated. Two did not respond to the informal email. For those who expressed clear interest, an information sheet (see Appendix A) was subsequently emailed, along with an invitation to request a consent form if they wished to proceed. This staged process was deliberate to ensure that consent was fully informed and self-initiated.

With an individualistic cultural upbringing, a foundation in Western theoretical desistance frameworks, and an intentional alignment with decolonising strategies, I approached this research with an awareness of the ethical complexities associated with my positionality as a Pākehā. From the outset, I held concerns about the risk of unintentionally distorting meaning or overlooking the lived realities of wāhine from collectivist cultures. These concerns were addressed through early and ongoing consultation with cultural advisors, whose guidance significantly informed both the research process and the interpretation of findings. One key recommendation was to recognise participants’ stories as tapu (sacred) and to regard my role not simply as a researcher, but as a kaitiaki (caretaker) of knowledge. This required taking the ‘second step’ in the research relationship, allowing participants to lead, and trusting their narratives to unfold in the time, pace, and space that felt most appropriate to them.

Tikanga protocols were central to engagement, cultivating a culturally grounded environment which acted as a protective vessel for the tapu stories entrusted during the research process. Wāhine were invited to open and close our sessions with karakia and on one occasion a waiata was shared. The interview process incorporated the sharing of kai to reinforce whakawhanaungatanga (Tinirau, 2020). In most instances, I prepared a picnic or organised lunch at a café. In one memorable case, a participant felt most comfortable preparing food for her tamariki while we conducted the interview. This created a natural rhythm to the interaction reflecting cultural practice and relational reciprocity (Tipene-Matua et al., 2009). The principle of whakanoa, the ritual neutralisation of tapu, was also thoughtfully incorporated through kōrero and whakakata noa before and after formal interviews (Eketone, 2020). This balanced the emotional and spiritual intensity of sharing with grounding moments, allowing both myself and the participants to re-enter ordinary space with care. Importantly, I remained with each participant beyond the recorded interview, allowing the process to breathe and ensuring that neither of us left the encounter in a heightened or unresolved state. This slow, attentive approach reflected not only tikanga-based values (Tinirau, 2020) but were deliberate gestures to honour manaakitanga.

Cultural advisors also raised important concerns about the potential harm of comparative reflection, if findings were presented collectively. It was noted that some women might compare themselves to others, which could evoke feelings of inadequacy or shame. In response, I committed to returning findings privately and individually, allowing participants to engage with their contribution without the pressure of relational measurement.

In addition to this, language was treated with great care throughout the study. As a carrier of cultural meaning, even subtle shifts in phrasing had the potential to alter or dilute intended messages, especially when participants used Māori or colloquial expressions. To preserve authenticity and ensure fidelity to participants' voices, all interviews were recorded

and transcribed verbatim. Direct quotations were used throughout the analysis ensuring authenticity. This approach positioned the women not as subjects of research, but as knowledge-holders and experts in their own journeys.

Psychological safety was a central ethical priority. Desistance research exposed participants to the risk of distress through the revisiting of traumatic pasts. To mitigate this, participants were made aware of the potential harms, reminded that they could pause or end the interview at any time and directed to support services as set out in the participant information sheet (see Appendix A). Furthermore, the interview space was designed to be conversational as opposed to extractive by probing for information.

It was also important to safeguard participants from self-incrimination, particularly given the potential for interviews to elicit disclosures of unreported or unprosecuted offences. This risk was clearly outlined in the participant information sheet (see Appendix A), and participants were advised to avoid sharing details which could place them at legal risk. They retained the right to amend or withdraw their contributions at any stage, and audio recordings were deleted upon receipt of their transcript approvals.

To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, identifying details were removed, and particular care was taken in the presentation of quotes to prevent deductive disclosure. Ethical approval for this study was granted by the University of Waikato Human Research Ethics Committee.

Data Collection

This qualitative study employed semi-structured interviews as its primary method of data collection. This method is particularly effective for gaining insight into participants' perspectives and for exploring unexpected themes that may emerge during the interview process (Curtis & Curtis, 2011). This approach was selected in alignment with both a feminist epistemological framework and a social realist orientation, which recognises that participants

bring subjective yet meaningful understandings of their world to the research encounter (Curtis & Curtis, 2011). Feminist epistemologies, in particular, make space for multiple, layered, and even contradictory realities, challenging the objectivism and detachment associated with positivist traditions (Rocque, 2021). This stance is especially appropriate for a study that does not seek to determine which reality is more ‘true,’ but rather to illuminate the diverse ways in which women interpret change. It recognises that different realities coexist, and that the stories women share are not only valid but constitute legitimate sources of knowledge (Curtis & Curtis, 2011).

During the initial stages of data collection, several women expressed a desire to have prior knowledge of the interview questions to feel more prepared. In response to this, the interview schedule (see Appendix B) was emailed to each participant three days before their scheduled interview. This approach also served as an additional opportunity to reconsider participation. At the beginning of each interview, the participant information sheet (see Appendix A) was reviewed collaboratively to ensure participants fully understood the scope of the research, potential emotional risks, and their rights, particularly the voluntary nature of participation and their ability to withdraw at any time. Following this, consent forms were signed, and the interview schedule (see Appendix B) was reintroduced. Participants were reminded that the interview was centred on their unique lived experience and would therefore be flexible, participant-led, and conversational in tone.

Participants were invited to glance over the interview schedule (see Appendix B) before beginning. While most did so silently, two participants remarked on how little attention they had given to some of the areas the questions addressed.

Conversation was guided by the research aims, while participants had the freedom to lead and shape the direction of the dialogue (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The interview schedule (see Appendix B) was used as a flexible framework to initiate reflection, rather than as a rigid

sequence of questions. Some participants chose to begin with an overview of the area's most significant to them, while others preferred to move through the questions sequentially.

Although most interviews covered the full range of prompts, discussions often centred on what felt most meaningful to the individual, and in two interviews a couple of questions were bypassed by the participant. As a result, interviews unfolded naturally often shaped by the participants' reflections on what set their change in motion, what helped or hindered their progress, and how they viewed their lives at the time of the interview.

With participants' consent, all interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim by the researcher. Transcripts were returned to participants via email, accompanied by an invitation to amend or clarify their contributions. This approach ensured that their meaning had been accurately captured and not misinterpreted (Van Manen, 2016).

Participants verified the accuracy of their transcripts, with no further amendments requested. This member-checking process contributes to the credibility and trustworthiness of the data (Carlson, 2010). Audio recordings were deleted upon receipt of transcript approvals.

Pseudonyms were used throughout the study not only to ensure confidentiality, but also as a deliberate choice to affirm participants' personhood, offering an alternative to the depersonalising tendencies often found in criminal justice discourse. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, identifying details were removed, and particular care was taken in the presentation of quotes to prevent deductive disclosure.

Data Analysis

Data analysis employed a thematic coding approach, drawing on both inductive insights from participants' narratives and deductive alignment with established desistance theories (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). "Thematic analysis can be a method which works both to reflect reality, and to unpick or unravel the surface of reality" (Braun and Clarke, 2006. p.9).

Coding was conducted manually to facilitate meaningful engagement with the stories. Manual coding has been recognised as particularly effective in qualitative research where narratives are personal, layered, and resistant to simplification (Bosit, 2003). This interpretive flexibility stood in contrast to software-based analysis methods, which can risk flattening the richness of narrative data (Bosit, 2003). Analysis followed an iterative process during which coding and analysis occurred in cyclical close readings of the transcripts, to capture language and meaning-laden phrases (Curtis & Curtis, 2011). This approach aligns with the social realist orientation of the study, which remained open to complex and evolving interpretations (Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009).

Initially coding was structured around four main areas of desistance: (1) triggers for change, (2) factors facilitating desistance, (3) factors supporting maintenance and (4) challenges to desistance. Secondary codes which developed from desistance triggers include (1) internal introspection and (2) maternal responsibility. Facilitating factors were coded into seven subthemes, three were structural and four were relational. Maintenance factors were coded into four relationally driven subthemes. Three secondary codes emerged under the primary code of 'challenges' which included overcoming addiction, accessing human and social capital and contemporary realities.

As analysis progressed, it became apparent that participants' narratives were more meaningfully organised around three overarching themes which related back to the structural factors facilitating desistance. These became primary codes and were used to structure the presentation of findings. Secondary codes captured patterns of either facilitation or constraint to illustrate the complex interplay of structure and agency within the desistance process.

Data analysis particularly focussed on key moments where participants articulated change, expressed ambivalence, or identified relational aspects as meaningful to their desistance journey. These moments were treated not as isolated revelations, but as situated

processes which offered insight into how women conceptualise and sustain positive change. This analytic approach reflects the broader epistemological and methodological stance of the research, one which values participant voices and holds space for individuality (Curtis & Curtis, 2011).

Introducing the women

Vee is 55 years old and identifies as NZ/Māori. Defining elements of her story include marrying her Pākehā husband at 18 and sustaining a lifestyle shaped by the presence of drugs and alcohol. Throughout the years of raising their children, this lifestyle involved both legal and illegal means of survival. Vee recalls her first conviction at age 33. By age 41 she and her husband were sentenced to a lengthy prison term for drug-related offences. At the time of the interview, Vee and her husband had been reunited for five years and were living with their adult children and grandchildren, working together in full time employment as groundskeepers.

Jasmine is 48 years old and identifies as Pākehā. Key details in her narrative include a permissive upbringing with limited supervision. Jasmine received her first conviction for fraud at age 15. Despite this early offence, she characterised her early adulthood as relatively normative, involving stable employment and recreational drug use. Around the age of 27, Jasmine experienced a significant decline into addiction and persistent offending. Her most recent conviction, at age 36, included drug-related charges for which she served ten years. At the time of the interview, Jasmine was in full-time employment and living next door to her adult children and grandchildren.

Rona is 38 years old and identifies as NZ/Māori. She described being raised in poverty by her grandparents before being placed into CYFS care.

I just felt really poor, really broken. There were kids that had, you know, beautiful things that I wanted, so I started stealing'n, yeah at the age of

twelve. And from there it just spiralled. Doing crime, running away from boarding houses, boarding schools, running away from CYFS homes that they put me in because of the abuse. (Rona)

Rona spoke of a 26-year methamphetamine addiction during which she cycled repeatedly through the criminal justice system and had children who were whāngai to relatives. At the time of the interview, Rona was a full-time mother of two young boys and working full time as a social worker.

Julia is 51 years old and identifies as Pakeha. She describes an unstable childhood leading to early addiction. “There was lots as a kid that I had to control because it wasn’t being taken care of.” She received her first conviction at age 36, and her most recent, related to violent offending, occurred at age 42. At the time of her last arrest, Julia had adolescent children who were subsequently separated. Julia had been released from prison twelve months prior and was serving parole in supported accommodation at the time of the interview.

Leanne is 57 years old and identifies as European/Māori. She described developing a criminal lifestyle as a result of addiction around the age of 23. She reflected on a 17-year relationship with the father of her children, a martial arts sensei, recalling that their life together fluctuated between periods of stability and chaos. “Part of our lives where we were on quite a positive kinda buzz and then when it turned to shit it turned to real shit.” She received her first conviction at age 38, and her most recent sentence commenced when she was 44 years of age. At the time of the interview, Leanne was the full-time legal guardian of her granddaughter and had been working in hospitality, as a manager for the past four years.

Christy is 36 years old and identifies as Pākehā. She was whāngai into a Māori family as a child. Christy reported that her criminal lifestyle began around the age of 18. Her most recent conviction, at age 28, was for fraud-related offences, for which she served a

three-year prison sentence. At the time of the interview, Christy was in a secure, healthy relationship with her partner, parenting their two adolescent children and running their own businesses.

Kasey is 44 years old and identifies as Australian/Māori. Her story was characterised by the onset of her offending at around 13 years of age, with convictions spanning robbery, fraud, and drug-related offences. Kasey recounted a complex personal history marked by repeated, historical involvement with the criminal justice system and ongoing familial strain. She was 36 years of age at the time of her last conviction. She has adult children and grandchildren who live independently. Kasey had sustained employment since her release and at the time of the interview, she had been working as a social worker for three years.

Simonne is 57 years old and identifies as Pākehā. She described a neglected upbringing and a lifestyle shaped by addiction, which began around the age of 16. At 27, she received a lengthy prison sentence. At sentencing she was the mother of five children. Upon incarceration, her children were placed into three separate foster homes and Simonne remained involved in their lives. Simonne faced significant challenges with both addiction and employment upon release, leading to multiple parole breaches. Approximately ten years after her initial release, she achieved sobriety and began to establish stability in her life. At the time of the interview, Simonne had maintained the role of manager in her workplace for three years and remained present in the lives of her children and grandchildren.

Taimana is 30 years old and identifies as NZ/Māori. She developed an addiction during adolescence, recalling early involvement in offending behaviour: “At twelve I was hanging out with older guys, doing jobs for them so I could get money. Breaking into cars, going on joy rides or stealing boxes and bottles from the liquor store.” Her lifestyle was shaped by the influence of antisocial peers, driven by a desire to belong: “I wanted what they had. I wanted their figure, I wanted their friends, I wanted their cars.” Her first conviction

was at age 21 and her most recent sentence was four years for a violent offence at age 25. At the time of the interview, Taimana had been sober for three years and was a full-time mother to four children, aged between three and fifteen.

Maggie, a 56-year-old woman who identifies as Pākehā, was parenting both adolescent and adult children at the time of interview. She reports her criminal trajectory to have begun at age 21, with her most recent and most serious conviction occurring at age 45 for drug-related offences. This resulted in a four-year custodial sentence. Maggie disclosed a childhood marked by significant adversity, including a highly abusive father, which led her to leave home at a young age. Since her release from prison, Maggie had been employed however at the time of the interview she was recovering from an injury, receiving a sickness benefit, and continuing to confront the ongoing challenges of substance dependence.

Charlene is 33 years old and identifies as NZ/Māori. Her daughter, four years old when Charlene went to prison was fourteen at the time of her release. Charlene describes her criminal trajectory as intergenerational, shaped by her father's enduring gang affiliation and the normalisation of offending within her family. "We just adopted that lifestyle. I got an addiction from it and then that drove my offending." She characterised her childhood as a constellation of adverse childhood experiences, including educational exclusion and early exposure to substance use. At the time of the interview, Charlene was the owner of a gym and in the final year of a bachelor's degree.

Tray is 54 years old and identifies as NZ/Māori. She described a significant shift in her life during her thirties, marked by a toxic relationship which contributed to her offending: "I was never really a criminal, it just served me during a toxic period in my life and it helped to mask the trauma, the chaos and the desperation." Tray received her first conviction at age 35, with her most recent offence, drug-related, occurring at age 41. At the time of the

interview, she was the owner of her own business and spoke of her adult sons, who were living overseas.

Chapter Four: Addiction Recovery

This study observed addiction recovery and desistance to unfold in tandem, emphasising an interdependence and preventing either to be viewed in isolation. Substance abuse emerged as the most pervasive barrier to desistance among participants, consistently undermining their capacity to disengage from crime. As outlined in Chapter Three, participants in this cohort came of age during a time when organised crime, gang cultures, and methamphetamine markets were becoming increasingly pervasive in Aotearoa New Zealand, conditions which shaped both their offending and the challenges of recovery. The narratives reveal addiction frequently interrupted women's earlier attempts to establish lives beyond crime.

With the exception of one participant, adolescence was marked by escalating substance use, alongside involvement in offending networks. All twelve participants expressed a sense of being entangled in cycles of dependency and criminalisation. Therefore, understanding how participants achieved recovery provides crucial insight into the earliest stages of desistance.

The following section maps the entry points into desistance, illustrating how the different routes (enforced, structured, natural) produced the first measurable shifts away from offending. Although the women's recovery pathways differed considerably, no route emerged as inherently superior. The effectiveness of each approach was contingent upon the complex interplay of individual motivation and structural conditions conducive to stability. In the second section attention turns to intersecting challenges, focussing, in particular, on the enduring impact of unresolved trauma and the criminogenic environments to which women return after release.

Enforced Recovery

Narratives in this study reveal the difficulty women experienced in extracting themselves from what had become normalised existences marked by addiction and instability. Giordano et al., (2002) term this as “situated choice” (p.1001) whereby individuals possess agency, however their capacity to achieve improved outcomes is frequently constrained by structural conditions which provide few meaningful alternatives for change.

The eventual rupture of entrenched cycles of harm occurred through imprisonment for five participants, suggesting that for some incarceration functioned as an enforced turning point, enabling the first tentative steps toward desistance.

Jasmine and Charlene illustrate this unmistakable paradox, whereby the only place these women could access the stability required for transformation was within a punitive institution rather than through accessible, community-based supports. “A couple of years isn’t enough. I don’t know how anyone can stop using without a big sentence.” (Jasmine). “It was prison, prison changed me, got me out of addiction, made me a routine for myself.” (Charlene)

The women did not romanticise incarceration, they recognised its unintended function in the way that it enforced sobriety, inadvertently offering the reprieve unavailable to them whilst in the web of offending and addiction in the community. Despite this attempt being successful, earlier custodial experiences had done little to redirect their trajectories. All twelve participants reported previous relapses into crime and addiction following earlier sentences, signalling that prison had offered little scope for genuine rehabilitation or gender-responsive support.

While some participants credited prison with disrupting harmful patterns, the structural support and agentic decisions accompanying enforced sobriety ultimately shaped desistance outcomes. Four of the five women who attributed their recovery to imprisonment

also engaged proactively in structured reintegration pathways upon their most recent release. Their deliberate avoidance of criminogenic environments, combined with a commitment to reintegration, illustrates desistance as contingent upon internal motivation aligning with external structure.

The narratives portray prison as both a refuge and a revolving door. While it temporarily interrupted cycles of harm, existing frameworks have been insufficient to deliver rehabilitation and redirect patterns of marginalisation at earlier life stages. These findings suggest that prison represents a profound missed opportunity to make a meaningful difference in the lives of disadvantaged, marginalised women.

Although this study recognises its limitations, it has captured women at a stage where lived experience provides rare insight into patterns of recidivism and desistance. Participants' life history accounts render systemic inadequacies visible. Taimana, Christy, and Charlene overcame addiction and ceased offending in their mid to late twenties which demonstrates that recovery and desistance can occur relatively early in the life course. In contrast, the remaining participants did not reach stability until between the ages of 36 and 54, suggesting a decade or more of missed opportunity for effective intervention and support across both custodial and community contexts.

If safety, stability, and peer support are the preconditions for recovery, then the challenge is not merely to replicate these within the prison environment, but to intercept struggling individuals and extend access to such structured environments within the community. Without this, the system merely reproduces the conditions it seeks to resolve, offering momentary reprieve without lasting change.

Formal Recovery

Rona's recovery through community-based addiction services, offers a distinctive example of the progressive internal shifts associated with secondary desistance. As theorised

by Giordano et al. (2002) in their cognitive transformation framework (see Chapter Two), these shifts involve increasing receptivity to prosocial alternatives, redefining substance use and offending as undesirable.

Six years prior to the interview, Rona was released into a residential rehabilitation programme, which she initially regarded as a bureaucratic obligation, “I just got out to tick boxes really.” Nevertheless, the programme exposed her to therapeutic frameworks such as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), Relapse Prevention Planning (RPP), and strategies for recognising warning signs of relapse. “I learnt a LOT,” she recalled, reflecting on how these tools slowly began to shift her thinking about crime and addiction.

Rona’s transition from rehabilitation to re-entry housing reveals the fragility of desistance when structural supports are prematurely withdrawn. Her attempt to maintain sobriety upon exit from the residential rehabilitation programme was destabilised by the pressures of independent living, financial hardship and social isolation, which led to relapse and reoffending. Such an account draws attention to what MacPherson (2022) refer to as the re-entry gap, the systemic lapse between structured support and unsupported reintegration. Rona’s experience highlights the limitations of time-limited support models which fail to account for the enduring nature of recovery, “They were like, you’re graduating now, you can go... so I lost all that connection and felt lost.”

The real turning point came when Rona voluntarily admitted herself into a second rehabilitation programme. “Since then, my whole life has changed.” Unlike her earlier experiences, this change was marked by conscious vulnerability, as she redirected her focus from simply being “out of prison”, toward recovering from addiction. “I had to commit and put myself out there. I had to make myself vulnerable.” Immersed in Narcotics Anonymous (NA), Rona completed “90 in 90” [ninety meetings in ninety days] and became actively involved in kaupapa Māori mental health and addiction support networks.

Her ability to locate, seize opportunities and infuse them with meaning illustrates how secondary desistance can be achieved. An identity once shaped by poverty, addiction, and recidivism gradually gave way to one oriented toward recovery, purpose, and community contribution.

The only thing that's keeping me sane and changing my life is being able to be there for things that are keeping me clean... It's all about giving back. I can only keep what I have, by giving it away. (Rona)

At the time of the interview, her days were structured around peer support work with homeless populations and facilitating Narcotics Anonymous meetings, roles which supported her to reinterpret her past as a foundation for generativity. Recovery from addiction served to stabilise her desistance and consolidate a prosocial identity. "I'm not about that life anymore... I'm just a law-abiding citizen, just trying to keep our community safe, you know."

Although several women credited institutional settings with providing the structure necessary for recovery, an equal number described navigating the process independently, a theme developed further in the following discussion.

Natural Recovery

Half of the participants described their recovery journeys as unfolding independently of formalised systems of care, highlighting theme consistent with what recovery literature refers to as "natural" recovery (Miller & Smith, 2010. p. 105). With the exception of Taimana, participants in this subgroup were all over the age of 50 years which indicates that the capacity to maintain abstinence was often realised in later adulthood. In these cases, desistance from both offending and substance use followed what Sampson & Laub (2003.

p.278), describe as a “default” pathway, one in which change occurs gradually via the stabilising effects of aging, social fatigue, and accumulated life experiences.

Desistance within this group is best understood through maturation and life course models (see Chapter Two), which conceptualise behavioural change not necessarily as a product of conscious transformation, but rather a reordering of priorities (Hirschi & Gottfredson, 1983; Sampson & Laub, 1993; Bersani & Doherty, 2018). Findings from this study resonate with that of Sampson and Laub (2003) who identify individuals often desist “without deliberate intention, through default, fatigue, or changes in routine life circumstances” (p. 278). Complementary to this, recovery literature suggest individuals may “mature” out of addiction (Best et al., 2019. p. 273). Sparkes and Day (2016), in their research on desistance beyond midlife, observed that older desisters often experience a misalignment between their chronological and maturational age, with the latter delayed due to prolonged exposure to criminal lifestyles and institutionalisation. This finding is particularly salient in the context of this study, as many participants matured within correctional systems which historically functioned less as rehabilitative environments and more as mechanisms of control. Such systems frequently reinforced criminal identities and normalised institutional dependency, thereby entrenching harmful behaviours rather than addressing their underlying causes.

The role of addiction recovery in this subgroup was complex. Participants did not describe a specific turning point or “hook for change” but instead framed transformation as emerging from the meanings attached to everyday interactions and informal roles, such as being a valued worker or loving grandmother. This interplay between subjective motivation and structural opportunity reflects what LeBel et al. (2008) describe as the “chicken and egg” problem of desistance, wherein it is difficult to determine whether internal change precedes

improved circumstances or vice versa. Even modest shifts in one domain, such as fatigue with addiction, could trigger movement in another, such as withdrawal from offending.

Whilst a more cautious approach to drug use was observed to emerge with age and the surfacing of new priorities, participants' narratives made clear that desistance could not be assumed until after release, when the durability of recovery was tested by real-world pressures. Maintaining a non-offending lifestyle was largely contingent upon sustained sobriety, positioning addiction recovery as a central mechanism in the desistance process.

Findings from this study reinforce growing literature which conceptualises recovery and desistance as interdependent and overlapping processes, initiated by a personal tipping point (a sense of being “done” with the lifestyle) and sustained through the accumulation of recovery capital, including access to prosocial networks, meaningful roles, and community connection. While the narratives informing this section demonstrate that formerly incarcerated women can successfully achieve both recovery and desistance, they also reveal the ongoing challenges and vulnerabilities which accompany these processes. The following section investigates the challenges which complicate recovery and threaten the sustainability of desistance.

Challenges & Barriers

Addiction recovery, as it intersects with desistance from crime, is most precarious during the initial stages of reintegration. Community life introduces a host of stressors including housing and economic insecurities, an ambiguous space of grappling with fragmented identities and the weight of expectations from others. This study found that for women with unresolved trauma, these pressures were overwhelming, and when paired with proximity to familiar criminogenic networks, susceptibility to relapse was amplified.

Despite completing custodial rehabilitation, the enduring effects of intergenerational trauma persisted for several participants. The narratives reveal four out of twelve women were attempting to navigate complex emotional terrain without adequate therapeutic support.

Tray, who had maintained desistance for seven years at the time of the interview, emphasised the substantial therapeutic work required to reach that point. It took her three years of intense therapy post-release “to refine my identity and show up in the world, where I believe I am worthy of love.” The reintegration support service to which she was connected assisted her to access this help.

Similarly, Julia, who had been on parole for a year at the time of interview, described her recent engagement with counselling services. Access to therapeutic support followed a chance encounter with a familiar Corrections Officer in the community, who referred her to Aoake Te Rā, “a service for people bereaved by suicide.” Until that point, the burden of trauma was a constant companion, spanning the years prior to incarceration, her eight years in custodial care, and the vulnerable post-release period.

Maggie and Leanne’s stories reveal a significant systemic issue, whereby ineffective trauma-informed care likely contributed to a more protracted desistance process. At the time of the interviews, both women were navigating desistance following second, and notably lengthy, terms of imprisonment. Despite enduring frequent setbacks and relapse over several years post-release, Maggie reported initiating therapeutic support only weeks prior to the interview. She shared the outcome of her most recent counselling session.

I couldn’t wait to tell her [counsellor] that I’ve figured it out, I’ve got a dissociative disorder. But once I’d finished describing it to her, she was like...there will be no need for you to see me again, there is nothing I can do for you, you need a psychiatrist. (Maggie)

The experience left her feeling deflated, eroding her hope for healing. Maggie illustrates a disheartening reality, in which the criminal justice system can serve as an extension of neglect, whereby ongoing trauma can be misunderstood, minimised or dismissed. Furthermore, the compounding sense of personal failure, experienced by women following relapse or setbacks, was found to significantly impede desistance efforts.

Half the women in this study reported periods of internalised shame during which they frequently withdrew into isolation, reluctant to engage with formal support services. This hesitancy to approach community rehabilitation programmes or traditional recovery organisations in times of need suggests a structural mismatch, wherein the vulnerability required to engage with support services exceeds the emotional capacity of women caught in addiction.

Leanne's account further captures how the burden of responsibility to identify and address personal trauma-based needs often falls on the individual. Despite graduating prison programmes, Leanne recalls initially being unable to recognise having experienced any adverse childhood events. She remembers simply believing she used drugs because she "liked them" until one day, whilst presenting at a public event, she came to understand the intergenerational harm which shaped her life, and in doing so discovered the agency to alter her direction.

I had a real epiphany when I was speaking one day, it was the first time I understood how I got to where I was. I realised, not who to blame, but how my sexual abuse as a child came about. And now that I have my own granddaughter, [I wondered] how could your grandmother allow that [sexual abuse]. Like, how could she *not* see it. And then, suddenly it was like an open book...they *did* see it, they just didn't think it was wrong... So

just to get a bit of an understanding around that intergenerational thing helped me to think... right well, that's it! (Leanne)

Through public speaking, Leanne experienced what was, in effect, a form of talk therapy, an unstructured yet cathartic space marking the first opportunity to unveil and begin to process the trauma. This act of verbalising harm served to catalyse the internal insight necessary to unblock psychological and emotional barriers which had previously delayed her progress.

Across this study it was evident that several women were released with unresolved trauma highlighting a significant gap in rehabilitative focus for custodial settings. The recognition and processing of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) rarely occurred prior to participation in individual therapeutic interventions, leaving underlying psychological wounds unaddressed. The lack of early trauma support is likely to have compounded vulnerability, hinder identity reconstruction, and limit engagement with prosocial opportunities, ultimately affecting the desistance process.

Location emerged as a significant factor in shaping desistance, with geographical distance from former criminogenic environments serving as a protective factor for addiction recovery. Although only four participants were initially released into familiar environments, by twelve months post-release, eleven out of twelve participants had returned to areas with accessible drug networks. Structural constraints shaped the terrain of re-entry, whereby accommodation options were limited. Those who utilised reintegration services upon release temporarily relocated. However, upon programme completion, safe housing became an issue. As a result, women frequently defaulted to familiar, albeit high-risk, environments which posed a direct threat to their recovery and desistance.

Relocation from criminogenic environments was viewed as non-negotiable by four participants, each of whom identified distance from former networks as instrumental in

sustaining recovery. In contrast, relapse within the first year of their release from prison was reported by several participants who lacked the opportunity to achieve stability prior to being re-exposed to former criminogenic networks.

A sense of hopelessness saturated Rona's earlier desistance efforts, where her only option was to reside in shared accommodation with known drug users. "They were still in active addiction, *every* house that I went to. I just couldn't handle it. But I was *still* able to get EM [electronic monitoring] bail to them." Community Probation's approval of shared accommodation in a high-risk environment reflects the harsh reality of constrained resourcing and limited transitional housing options in Aotearoa New Zealand. The futility of this arrangement highlights enduring structural challenges during re-entry, most notably those relating to housing, which echoes findings by Farrall et al. (2010), Nugent and Schinkel (2016), and Low et al. (2025).

Grieving the loss of her daughter, Julia's recovery was derailed in an ordinary moment of vulnerability, accepting marijuana from an old associate at the local supermarket. She recalled the weight of her realisation "I'd just broken my 8 years, 9 months and 64 days of straight soberness. There was so much to it that wrecked it for me. I just wanted to sit back and be ok, but I wasn't ok." Had Julia been afforded greater physical distance between herself and former associates whilst on her 'healing journey' the likelihood of maintaining sobriety may have significantly improved. Instead, what might have appeared as a minor lapse in judgement functioned to weaken Julia's belief in her ability to maintain positive changes.

In recounting her return to the community where she grew up, Maggie described the inescapable ties between place and harm, exposing how attempting to desist in an environment which previously nurtured addiction, left little room for growth or change. "You can't just stop a certain life, a certain way of living, without replacing it with something

else.” Maggie explained that relocation was logistically complex due to overlapping barriers including financial hardship, inaccessible housing, and the demands of caring for six children and a dependent mother. Maggie’s reintegration was complicated by the immediate caregiving responsibilities she was compelled to assume. With the children’s father, their primary support during her incarceration, facing imminent imprisonment for serious drug offences, Maggie had little opportunity to stabilise before moving back into their home shortly after her release. Her story highlights the gendered realities of desistance in which hazardous recovery landscapes often render pathways away from crime structurally unattainable.

Consistent with a substantial body of existing scholarship, this study identified low social capital to constitute a persistent and significant barrier to desistance from crime (Sampson & Laub, 2003; Farrall, 2004; Brown & Ross, 2010; Farrall, 2013; Low, 2025). The notion of social capital including “embeddedness in a set of relations of trust” (Farrall, 2004, p. 61) was found to be severely compromised in many participants’ lives prior to incarceration and further eroded during their time in prison. Furthermore, existing custodial frameworks are incompatible to address and ameliorate problems of low social capital, leaving many women to retain unsafe but familiar ties to criminogenic networks. These connections, while inherently high-risk, often serve as the only accessible forms of support upon release. Based on shared experiences of marginalisation and adversity, former networks frequently undermine desistance by reproducing cycles of social exclusion and restricting access to transformative, prosocial relationships. In the absence of viable alternatives, reliance on these ties became a pragmatic necessity, one that risked reinforcing antisocial identities precisely when the process of prosocial reinvention was most fragile (LeBel et al., 2008; Farrall, 2002).

In addition to this, the present study revealed several participants experienced relapse as a perceived moral failure which posed a significant barrier to accessing health services. This perception served to intensify negative affect, with feelings of guilt and shame undermining participants' sense of agency. Furthermore, Narcotics Anonymous (NA) appeared to be the only formal recovery service known to participants, with only three women attempting to engage with the service. With the exception of Rona, who shared knowledge of a plethora of contemporary addiction recovery services during the interview, the two other participants who attended NA in response to a relapse found the group setting incompatible with their recovery needs and discontinued participation. In this way, traditional recovery models appeared misaligned with their psychological readiness and relational preferences.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter has shown that recognising adverse childhood experiences seldom occurred prior to a therapeutic setting. Despite extensive correctional oversight, several participants were released with unaddressed trauma, revealing a systemic failure to identify and deliver appropriate mental health support to promote desistance. As a result, the burden of managing the psychological effects of trauma was displaced onto the post-release period, where women were frequently left to navigate its impacts without structured support.

While a minority of women credited avoiding criminogenic environments as a key factor in sustaining sobriety and desistance, most were unable to access this protective distance. The lack of access to safe housing meant desisters were often expected to build prosocial lives within hazardous landscapes.

The findings indicate an urgent need for meaningful reflection on whether existing systems facilitate rehabilitation, or inadvertently delay the transformative work essential for

desistance – the desistance which occurs through the difficult navigation of autonomy, accountability, and social reintegration beyond institutional walls.

This study offers critical insights into several practical shortcomings which, if addressed, could substantially enhance outcomes for women pursuing desistance. Implementing these findings calls for an urgent reconsideration of how trauma-informed, recovery-oriented, socially networked, and place-sensitive supports are embedded within correctional and reintegration systems.

An important issue which emerged is the ineffectiveness of existing custodial frameworks to address complex trauma-based needs. This study underscores the responsibility of correctional systems in proactively identifying and responding to trauma-related needs among women in their care. Whilst it is understood, the current lack of resourcing severely limits the availability of individualised therapeutic interventions, this raises critical questions around the ethical responsibility of institutions to provide environments which facilitate psychological healing. Without structural support women are left to navigate unresolved trauma within precarious re-entry contexts, thereby undermining the very aims of rehabilitation.

The underutilisation of community addiction support services signals a critical information gap. Women experiencing instability during the early stages of desistance often lacked the emotional bandwidth to independently access support. In moments of acute vulnerability, the psychological toll of navigating service systems, coupled with limited knowledge of available options, resulted in withdrawal rather than outreach. Contemporary recovery landscapes increasingly include informal and varied modes of support. Furthermore, social media presence has diversified the terrain of recovery offering recovery networks in ways which are likely to feel less insurmountable and more aligned with emotional readiness. These platforms offer visibility, flexibility, and cultural familiarity, factors which may

enhance uptake, particularly when traditional models feel alienating or overly institutional. Integrating information about contemporary community recovery support networks into custodial reintegration and relapse prevention planning, may offer a valuable tool for bridging these gaps. It is crucial that women are equipped with accessible knowledge about available services prior to release. This includes not only formal services but also alternative access points into recovery capital which reflect contemporary realities. Promoting equitable desistance outcomes demands institutional commitment to closing information gaps. To maximise impact, information should not only be disseminated but delivered through facilitated discussion, such as those occurring within case management relations, where personal guidance can unlock access to social and recovery capital.

This research contributes to the growing body of scholarship (Cobbina, 2009; Hunter & Farrall, 2015) with findings which underscore the necessity for strategic distancing from criminogenic environments. Women would benefit from a more considered approach to reintegration planning to grant women the space to stabilise new identities before confronting old terrains. This can be achieved with deliberate attention to the conditions of release accommodation and how those environments may either support or jeopardise addiction recovery. Furthermore, comprehensive, and flexible contingency planning is essential to accommodate post-release realities which may diverge significantly from pre-release expectations.

Further implications point to the salience of establishing social capital prior to release. Social capital, defined as normative networks of support, has been shown to significantly buffer against relapse and recidivism (Farrall, 2002; Weaver & McNeill, 2015). This study suggests a need for reimagined correctional frameworks which expand access to include structured engagement with community-based institutions such as marae, recovery networks, fitness facilities, and whānau-led initiatives pre-release. Facilitating intentional interactions in

these spaces, particularly with mentors and kaupapa Māori organisations would offer forms of engagement in real-world settings and demystifying lifestyles beyond crime. Integrating such practices into correctional frameworks would mark a shift toward relationally informed approaches which recognise desistance as socially contingent rather than relying solely on individual willpower.

Chapter Five: Employment

Employment has long been regarded as a cornerstone of desistance, frequently conceptualised as the mechanism through which individuals are integrated into prosocial routines and connected to structures of informal social control (Sampson & Laub, 1993; Uggen, 2000). It is widely understood across desistance literature that securing a job does not translate into desistance from crime (McIvor et al., 2009; Barry, 2000). However, a substantial body of research demonstrates the stabilising influence of work through structured routine and financial independence (Farrall, 2002; Sampson & Laub, 2007). Scholars have further emphasised that it is the quality and meaning attached to employment which explains its relevance to desistance (Bevan, 2015; Rodermond et al., 2016).

Consistent with the research findings of Weaver (2015) the present study observed employment to support identity formation and the realignment of priorities, aspirations, and key relationships. While a strand of desistance literature places greater emphasis on key relationships, than on employment, in shaping women's desistance (Brenda, 2005), more recent research highlights the significant role of employment in supporting the construction of replacement selves (Opsal, 2012; Barr, 2019; Low, 2024).

The following section will show that employment contributed to stability across individual and social dimensions, providing the structural conditions necessary for the identity and relational development central to desistance. Several participants had engaged in legitimate work between the onset of their offending and their most recent offence, suggesting employment exerts a weaker influence on desistance in early adulthood compared to midlife. This finding lends strong support to Sampson and Laub's (2007) claim that the effects of work on desistance vary across the life course.

Drawing on participant narratives, this chapter discusses three key themes which emerged revealing employment as a critical factor in supporting women's desistance from

crime. Firstly, employment emerged as an active arena for reconstructing identity, allowing participants to re-engage and strengthen prosocial capacities of responsibility, routine, and accountability which were previously diminished by addiction and criminal behaviour. Secondly, the findings underscore the significance of employment as a stabilising factor against relapse into harmful behaviours. Thirdly, employment functioned as a locus of tertiary desistance, enabling participants to experience a sense of belonging through trust-based and reciprocal relationships. The chapter then moves to consider the challenges and barriers to employment, whereby digital punishment amplifies exclusion and employment barriers are unequally experienced across reintegration pathways.

Identity

Key findings of the present study include the diverse processes of identity transformation observed across participant narratives, reflecting patterns of reconstruction, restoration, and discovery, individually shaped by the socio-historical contexts of their pasts. As will be illustrated below, Simonne, Charlene and Rona demonstrated identity reconstruction as a process of redefining the self through new moral frameworks, which involved replacing the internal logic of offending with values grounded in social conformity. In contrast, Tray, Vee, Jasmine, Taimana and Leanne described identity restoration, characterised by the revival of selfhood which predated offending and re-established continuity with earlier, socially integrated identities. Meanwhile, Kasey and Christy revealed a process of identity discovery, in which previously unrealised capacities and aspirations were cultivated through employment. Across these variations, identity transformation was not merely the substitution of antisocial attitudes with prosocial alternatives but an iterative process of self-evaluation, social feedback, and role performance through which gradual consolidation evolved into sustained features of the moral self.

Participant narratives brought to light, the normalisation of chaos which characterised pre-desistance lives. Fear and distrust were ordinary conditions and interpersonal relationships were accompanied by an agenda. Within such criminogenic social ecologies, emotional detachment functioned as a key adaptive mechanism, enabling survival while simultaneously constraining the capacity for authenticity and meaningful connection. This social conditioning cultivated what Giordano et al. (2002) describe as an emotional armour, a form of adaptive resilience which conflicts with the behavioural and emotional expectations of pro-social communities. Within workplace settings, meaningful change required a process of recalibration, adjusting to environments which no longer required hyper-vigilance but instead valued trust, reliability, and consistency. Central to participants identity shifts was the internalisation of social repertoires conducive to participation in conventional life.

Employment was instrumental in supporting desistance journeys by offering structured environments in which participants could test, perform, and internalise new role identities. Through routines, accountability, and the experience of being trusted within prosocial communities, work functioned as a site for practising alternative selves aligned with emerging moral and cognitive frameworks as illustrated by the women in the following paragraphs.

Being scaffolded into the role of a peer support significantly altered Rona's perspective on legitimacy, rendering her former lifestyle incompatible with the expectations of her professional position.

Accountability is one of my main values... I'm not being a nark, I'm just looking out for you. You're going to thank me later because I got you out of this shit. It's not an issue because I have to deal with it on a daily basis here at work. (Rona)

Being a 'nark' was a fast way to invite exclusion in her former life, where 'belonging' within criminogenic networks relied on her ability to maintain a strict code of silence. Rona contending "It's not an issue" signals the internalisation of new moral order, one in which engaging police involvement in behavioural incidents is not only acceptable but expected. Rona reconstructed her identity to approach such interactions with a sense of civic responsibility, understanding that it builds trust with people in her care. The cognitive transformation was made explicit when she professed:

I'm not like that snitches get stitches kind of person now. I used to be, full heartedly use to be... like gang signs and all that stuff. I'm not about that life anymore, because I'm not. I'm not a gangster, I'm not someone that wears a patch or not higher than anybody else. I'm just a law-abiding citizen, just trying to keep our community safe, you know. (Rona)

Her workplace role contributed to reinterpret practices once equated with disloyalty as acts of protection and care. Previously, informing the police would have violated her moral code, however, in her workplace culture, cooperation is recast as ethical responsibility "I'm just looking out for you." Rona explained that in her professional role she encounters "challenging people" whose behaviours require intervention to prevent harm and protect the wider community. Her seemingly simple statement, "because I'm not" might appear unremarkable, yet it captures the solidification of her moral identity. It conveys that the values tied to her former lifestyle no longer align with who she understands herself to be. This illustrates how employment can facilitate the reconfiguration of moral reasoning, providing both a behavioural framework and a reflective mirror through which a reconstructed identity is validated.

Kasey's account shows employment can function as a platform for constructing a replacement self, not only by signalling change to others but by also enabling the internal

recognition of change. Her first legitimate role, a short-term internship, demanded both commitment and attitude. “I was riding long distances in the rain, showing up early, proving my reliability.” Acts of perseverance symbolised self-determination. “I set my own expectations, and I proved myself.” Within a workplace that valued responsibility, punctuality, and reliability, the simple act of “showing up” became a mechanism through which Kasey enacted her reconstructed identity in consistent and socially validated ways, fostering both self-efficacy and credibility. As Giordano et al. (2002) contend, identity transformation is often realised through the enactment of new roles which simultaneously require and reinforce change.

Vee’s account highlights employment as a key mechanism through which she negotiated personal and role identities amid the disorientation as a consequence of nine years in prison.

When I got out, I was like, I just want to go back to jail, this is too hard.
Honestly, I got into a state of mind when I thought it wasn’t worth being out anymore, because my kids had moved on without me...where do I fit in here.
And my kids were saying, you’re home Mum, just be Mum. But I watched my kids as they went to school and got up and done things and I, you know, did the usual, the dishes and cleaned the house but I got into a state and thought I was going to slip. That’s what happened. I had to realise that because my kids had moved on, I needed to. I had to do the same thing. I wasn’t allowed to work yet but I got me a job...working under the table.

(Vee)

Upon release, her adult children had devised a plan for her to take on the traditional role of a full-time grandmother. Yet, as an active person, confinement to the home compounded her psychological discomfort and left her feeling at risk of “slipping” into old

patterns, including substance use. Her decision to pursue employment, despite the expectations of both probation and family, signalled resistance to an imposed identity. The role of “stay-at-home grandmother” conflicted with her self-concept as an independent woman seeking purpose. Employment thus provided the structure and sense of contribution she needed to stabilise emotionally. Her playful assertion, “Nanny is busy, Nanny works now, and Nanny LOVES work,” captures how employment contributed to consolidate her identity, allowing her to reconcile generativity with independence.

Employment emerged across this study a significant “hook” for change (Giordano et al., 2002. p. 992) with eight participants describing workplace roles which provided opportunities for moral identities to be reinforced. As Maruna (2001) contends, desistance narratives are often structured around redemption scripts, and employment offers a key platform upon which these scripts can be enacted and socially validated. Similarly, Veysey et al. (2013) emphasise, the establishment of stable employment is critical to both motivating and sustaining desistance amongst individuals with histories of drug dependency and offending.

Stability

The second key theme to emerge regarding employment as a factor of desistance was its stabilising influence. Securing a job produced positive effects across interconnected psychological and economic domains. These two domains were found to be closely interconnected, with economic precarity being identified as a primary source of negative rumination and psychological distress. This distress was recognised by participants as presenting high risk for relapse into harmful behaviours. As noted in Chapter Four, participants across this sample directly linked relapse into substance use with a relapse into offending, emphasising the interdependence of recovery and desistance across their journeys.

Results from this study resonate with previous research by Uggen (2000), who found that employment is particularly effective during the liminal phase of reintegration, where routine and structure were shown to reduce idle time, regulate emotions, and minimise opportunities for relapse into substance use. Participant accounts correspond with the insights of Veysey et al. (2013), who emphasise the importance of stable employment in disrupting harmful cognitive patterns and alleviating emotional distress linked to reoffending.

Significant insight is offered by Rona, who, although not the youngest participant, had cycled through the criminal justice system more frequently than others. Aware of her ongoing vulnerability she explained, “If I sit with complacency, I’m going to end up bored and using. Sitting with feelings, sitting with emotions... I try and keep myself busy to not get into that state.” Employment was a central strategy for several participants, providing structure and activity to safeguard themselves against emotional discomfort and potential relapse.

After experiencing the imposed structure of prison life, Charlene recognised that routine was vital to her wellbeing. “I’m real big on routine because growing up I never had routine. Go to bed whenever you want, do whatever you want.” Employment offered a way to replicate that rhythm post-release, helping her manage triggers such as boredom and reinforcing a sense of purpose. “When I get bored, that’s a huge trigger for me. I have to keep busy...[work] fills me up every day...This is what works.” Charlene’s narrative demonstrates considerable intentionality in her efforts to manage her circumstances and maintain stability through legitimate means. Her account reflects the ongoing negotiation of persistent risks embedded within her immediate social environment, particularly those stemming from familial contexts where antisocial behaviours remain normalised. “This is what works” encapsulates the significance Charlene attributes to employment as a strategy to safeguard her progress and maintain desistance.

Christy's experience of securing a job shortly after her release from prison resonates strongly with Sampson and Laub's (2007) theory, which underscores the significance of adult social bonds in the desistance process. "Employment pulled me out of my bubble... and really made me who I am today because of my job." Taking up a role as a chef within an essential service signified a significant turning point, redirecting her life towards one filled with purpose. What began as an effort to re-establish structure and social engagement during the fragile phase of reintegration ultimately progressed into business ownership and managerial leadership. Christy framed employment as a lifeline, recalling the mental health struggles, social isolation, and lack of direction she faced four years prior to the interview, upon her release from prison.

Across this study, the women's narratives draw attention to the psychological terrain of desistance, challenging traditional understandings of employment's role within this process. Sampson and Laub's (2007) conceptualisation of employment, primarily as a mechanism of informal social control, appears to overlook the gendered reality of women's desistance, whereby the context of work environments (such as structure, purpose and social interaction) operates to support the emotional regulation necessary for maintaining desistance.

In terms of economic stability, employment was broadly regarded as essential for achieving self-sufficiency and sustaining stability in the desistance process. Interestingly, with the exception of one participant, women with dependent children articulated a more direct link between employment and economic independence than those without caregiving responsibilities. This suggests that economic strain is amplified among mothers balancing reintegration with family obligations.

At the time of the interview, Taimana was a full-time mother who expressed eagerness to return to work once her daughter was older, viewing employment as a means of

buffering against criminogenic thought patterns. “It keeps my brain busy, so I don’t get into crime.” She noted that in times of boredom or economic strain, she remains vulnerable to familiar mental scripts. “The first thought that still, even to this day [four years substance and crime free], pops into my head is...If I just did *this*, I could have *that*.”

Departing from scholarship which positions key relationships as more influential than employment in women’s desistance (Brenda, 2005), this study found that work and maternal roles carried comparable significance in supporting secondary desistance, with employment valued for its stabilising capacity. Among the nine employed mothers in this study, employment was consistently framed as meaningful beyond its economic returns, symbolising the capacity to provide and materialise their identities as dependable and stable mothers. Consistent with Uggen’s (2000) conceptualisation of employment as a key turning point for older adults, this study found that stable work functioned as both a marker of competence and an expression of self-determination, supporting participants to sever former lifestyles and maintain desistance from crime. Employment proved particularly effective in supporting early desistance by offering routine, economic independence, and a means of interrupting cycles of rumination and risk, thereby enabling the psychological and structural conditions necessary for secondary desistance. As desistance progressed, the meaning of employment extended beyond stability to encompass belonging and recognition, reflecting the relational processes central to tertiary desistance.

Tertiary Desistance

Employment emerged as a particularly salient factor in supporting desistance from crime in this study, with its influence extending beyond secondary desistance (within-individual changes) to facilitate inclusion across micro (familial), meso (community) and macro (institutional) systems. In line with Sampson and Laub’s (2007) assertion that employment operates as a mechanism through which adult social bonds are formed, this

research found that participation in employment significantly reshaped the relational landscape of participants lives. This section will show that experiencing relational goods such as reciprocity, trust and respect within workplace interactions frequently supported a redefinition of what constitutes a ‘good life,’ altering how participants valued lifestyles beyond crime and connected with others.

At the micro level, employment contributed to restore relationships by allowing participants to demonstrate transformation rather than simply declare change had occurred. Several participants emphasised the importance of their families witnessing a steady rhythm of self-determination and self-control, contributing to dissolve concerns and repair fractured trust. Vee candidly described her family placing “conditions” on her during the early stages of reintegration. Over time however, visible routines and responsibilities signalled dependability which began to extend into her familial roles, as a wife, mother and particularly as a grandmother.

Desistance literature has long acknowledged the instrumental role of families in supporting transitions away from crime. Traditionally, this support has been understood in practical terms, such as the provision of housing, financial assistance, or childcare (Farrall et al., 2010; McNeill, 2006). However, such tangible support was comparatively rare among participants in this study. The age range of participants (30 –57 years), with a mean age of 46.5, likely accounts in part for this pattern, reflecting a life-stage at which many had already established independence. Familial environments, particularly relationships with parents and siblings, were frequently described as sites of tension, dysfunction, and emotional strain. The meaning participants attached to these relationships was found to closely align with the dynamics identified by Lawson-Te Aho and Liu (2010), who emphasise that within the context of Aotearoa New Zealand, whānau functions as a site of social obligation and

collective responsibility. Maintaining desistance frequently required the setting of firm relational boundaries within familial context to safeguard their progress.

Several women reported that workplace participation provided their earliest experience of belonging within a moral community, suggesting that meso-level environments offered more immediate and accessible opportunities for tertiary desistance. Maggie was one of seven participants to claim the workplace environment performed as a space in which she was seen for her authentic self, rather than through the lens of her past. “It felt good, like I had a purpose. Everybody treated me like me. Nobody knew what I had done, and I was like working with real high people. I was all over the factory and the trust was there.” Maggie’s experience of being valued for individual capabilities rather than reminded of abandoned maladaptive behaviours was experienced as reinforcing, symbolising a pathway to inclusion.

Workplaces were observed across this study as sites of recognition and reciprocity, where participants not only encountered a sense of purpose but also experienced value in being needed and relied upon by others. Christy demonstrates how purpose served to reinforce her perceptions of having something of worth to contribute to conventional society. Having commenced her employment in an essential services café shortly before COVID-19, Christy described pouring “every drip and drop” of her energy into work, to prove to herself and her employers that she was “worthy” of the opportunity she had been given. While other staff declined additional hours, Christy volunteered to work seven days a week, interpreting effort and endurance as a gateway to redemption. She recalls initially feeling “undeserving” under the weight of internalised shame and articulates the relational shift between worthless and belonging. “I felt so useless, you know...It felt *so* good to be needed.” Growing responsibilities within her role enabled Christy to consolidate a moral self within socially valued structures, what Maruna (2001) describes as a “redemption script.”

Individuals believe they can change when they are surrounded by others who believe in them. Tertiary desistance across this study, was observed as a protracted process of reconciling internal and external identities through ongoing exchanges of trust, recognition, and accountability. This process relied on the subtle validation of change by valued others, typically conveyed through acts of trust, as the enduring effects of private stigma (such as unworthiness and shame) meant that self-acceptance often trailed behind external affirmation.

Alongside the mutual concern and reciprocity identified by Weaver and McNeill (2015) as the types of relational goods which enhance social capital, this study found accountability to be a particularly salient dimension of workplace belonging. Kasey provides valuable insight into this finding, as she interprets being held to account in her workplace as a symbol of care and respect. “Yeah, definitely a belonging...you do get praise, but you also get... like pulled up as well.” For Kasey, constructive criticism signified social investment, an indication that her colleagues valued her enough to challenge her. She explained that she appreciated getting “pulled up” more than praise, as it reinforced her sense of belonging and encouraged her ongoing personal growth.

Similarly, Leanne described accountability as central to her desistance journey, contrasting her former lifestyle with her current experience of being answerable to others. “In my offending I was never accountable to anyone, nobody needed to know anything about what I was doing. But by being accountable to the support... brought me back into a space to be open and honest.” Leanne’s account illustrates tertiary desistance as a reorientation toward relational interdependence and moral responsibility. Within this framework, accountability functions as a relational good which serves to strengthen a sense of belonging, by binding individuals to shared norms and validating their prosocial identities.

Participant narratives indicate that social validation within community and workplace environments (meso level) were initially experienced as unfamiliar yet profoundly inclusive,

an observation which suggests that seemingly ordinary interactions grounded in mutual respect can carry extraordinary significance for individuals desisting from crime. Participants, whose life histories were often marked by trauma, violence, and the normalisation of antisocial behaviour, frequently described employment as one of the few social contexts in which they were treated as “normal.” In this way social inclusion not only challenged their internalised stigma but also reinstated attachments to conventional society.

Across this study workplaces functioned as relational spaces where interactions with colleagues, clients, and the community generated the social capital crucial for sustained desistance. Charlene’s passion for her role as a personal trainer exemplifies this process whereby interpersonal relationships affirm her sense of belonging within a community orientated toward goal setting, discipline, and wellbeing. She describes the gym environment as ‘my people’ capturing a sense of identification and acceptance which stands in contrast to the instability characterising some of her familial relationships affected by addiction.

Simonne articulates the social significance of employment, which motivated her to create distance from criminogenic networks. “Employment has kinda helped me to live a different lifestyle, because you start connecting with different people, who are on a more healthier pathway, which helps me be on a better pathway in life.” She further explained how her employer not only hired her despite her convictions but also offered friendship and support. “He is not just my boss he is like a friend... having the right people around me helps me stay on that pathway.”

Leanne’s experience illustrates the incremental and reflexive nature of tertiary desistance, revealing a process of earning trust while simultaneously learning to trust.

It’s been a process, like from the support, being at work and being in a community where you feel connected...and that takes time. It doesn’t happen overnight. You need to earn your trust in the community. I mean even if

people get to know where you're from [prison], where you've been, it's still a process of being able to hold your own and accept what's done is done. And that's eleven years later! (Leanne)

Leanne's acknowledgment that desistance involves being able to "accept what's done is done" emphasises the intrapersonal dimension of the process, which involves reconciling one's sense of self with the perceptions of others. Yang et al. (2007) conceptualises this transition from a discreditable identity, where stigma is anticipated, to an accepted identity, where credibility is restored. Findings reveal participants actively managed their impressions, continually navigating the unerasable traces of their pasts by evaluating the relational goods they had to offer and maintaining quality connections.

Two participants in this study described instances where employment facilitated inclusion at a macro level, extending the effects of employment on desistance to formal institutional recognition. Simonne and Leanne each recounted being supported by their employers to obtain Duty Manager Licences, a process which required local council approval and formal validation of their responsibility, trustworthiness, and moral integrity. These experiences marked a tangible form of civic reintegration, whereby participants were re-evaluated by institutional systems as capable and accountable citizens. Their successful navigation of regulatory procedures illustrates what McNeill (2016) term political inclusion, the restoration of rights and responsibilities which symbolically reinstate one's credibility within society. The employer's role in scaffolding these applications demonstrates the significance of relational advocacy in mediating structural barriers, specifically those linked with criminal records. Institutional endorsement functioned as moral confirmation of change for Simonne and Leanne, reinforcing a sense of belonging to the broader moral community. In this way, employment served as a conduit through which social trust, institutional recognition, and self-efficacy converged to consolidate tertiary desistance at the macro level.

With the exception of Taimana, who was a full-time mother, and Charlene, who was completing tertiary study while managing her gym, all participants had, at some point in their desistance journeys, engaged in formal employment interview processes. Possessing social capital, particularly through prosocial peers and reintegration services, proved instrumental in facilitating access to initial employment opportunities. These connections enabled participants such as Tray, Maggie, Vee, Rona, Julia, Leanne, and Kasey to access the labour market through relational referrals, emphasising the significance of social capital in mediating employment barriers. Vee's workplace, composed entirely of individuals with lived experience of incarceration, offered a rare space of mutual recognition and acceptance. She identified this inclusive environment, free from stigma and rich in shared understanding, as fundamental to her desistance.

Across the study, participants characterised job-seeking as a deeply vulnerable process, often accompanied by anxiety and fear of rejection associated with criminal record disclosure. Despite these challenges, three women successfully secured employment without network support. Jasmine obtained work in animal care, while Simonne and Christy entered the hospitality sector, both progressing to managerial roles, with Christy achieving business ownership by the time of the interviews. Although participants' routes into employment varied in terms of relational support and perceived difficulty, all expressed pride in outcomes which were self-determined. These findings suggest that individual agency significantly shaped the meaning participants attached to employment. Self-determined pathways not only enhanced participants' sense of self-efficacy but also reinforced their commitment to sustained desistance by transforming employment into a site of empowerment.

The literature cautions that entry-level jobs may fail to generate self-worth or cognitive transformation, particularly among women (Leverentz, 2006). This study supports this notion insofar as findings show the value derived from employment was less associated

with economic benefits and more in the sense of responsibility and interpersonal connection the environment cultivated. Commitment to workplace roles emerged as a direct outcome of meaningful relationships. Notably, eight of the twelve participants explicitly identified the social and relational aspects of employment, rather than the work itself, as the most significant factor sustaining their motivation and stability.

Challenges & Barriers

All participants reported experiencing persistent criminality (a criminal lifestyle) during some period of their lives. Six women cycled through the criminal justice system twice and the remaining six experienced several terms of incarceration. These patterns of recidivism were closely linked to addiction (see Chapter Four), which operated as a major barrier to achieving stability and sustaining employment. Consistent with Low's (2025) research on women desisting from crime in Aotearoa New Zealand, this study identified a constellation of socioeconomic disadvantages which had constrained access to employment. Low (2025) similarly observed that participants' early lives were marked by poverty, trauma and/or exposure to substance abuse and criminality, conditions which disrupted normative educational and vocational pathways.

Rona recounted being determined to establish a life beyond crime when she secured her first legitimate job. At 36 years of age, she was referred for the role, upon graduation from a rehabilitation programme. Despite demonstrating strong motivation and potential, the opportunity unfolded within a context of instability. Rona explained that the abrupt severing of connections upon completion of a three-month programme destabilised her. Subsequent success was achieved six months later with coordinated cross-agency support. This support included recovery services, housing assistance, education and employment revealing the critical role of wraparound interventions to assist desistance outcomes. Her account suggests

that without relational support employment alone is unlikely to offset the pressures of poverty, isolation and addiction.

Findings of the present study reveal that once addiction was addressed (see Chapter Four), the most enduring barrier to employment was the stigma of a criminal record. Several women described harmful anxieties surrounding job applications, where the psychological pressure of anticipated exclusion often exceeded the reality of discrimination. Such apprehension undermined confidence and perpetuated a sense of social precarity.

Jasmine applied for her first job eighteen months after her release from prison, which suggests social reintegration was likely tempered by self-doubt and uncertainty.

Employment...wasn't important when I got out. I thought aw... I'm not a worker...

Maybe it was just the unknown...I knew I needed, for myself, to start putting myself out there. I needed to push myself to do something. When the driving job came up it was like aw I'll apply for it. I didn't think I would get it but gave it a go. (Jasmine)

Despite having held leadership roles during incarceration, Jasmine was initially cautious about engaging with employment in the community. It was only when the stagnation of inaction began to intensify negative rumination that she resolved to take deliberate steps toward change.

Christy provided insight into her exploration of tertiary-level vocational pathways in nursing and psychology (discussed further in Chapter 6), as a deliberate strategy to delay confronting the stigma attached to her criminal record. As she became more familiar with professional registration requirements, she realised that her criminal record would likely perform as a barrier into regulated professions. Charlene shared a similar apprehension, emphasising the personal rather than structural dimension of this barrier. "One of the biggest challenges I think I will face is trying to get employment after doing all these years of studying, under a lot of shame."

Taimana highlights the contemporary realities of stigma as a barrier to employment, where it is compounded by what Bushway and Uggen (2021, p. 38) term “digital punishment”, the enduring visibility of criminal histories which remain searchable and publicly accessible.

And now they do criminal background checks. They’re not going to look at me. Like I have the credentials, but if you’re given two applications, you see one who has done five and a half years in jail and one that’s never done jail time, you’re going to go for the easier option. (Taimana)

Her reference to the “easier option” demonstrates not only an awareness of the personal consequences of a criminal record but also the structural dynamics shaping employment decisions. Taimana recognises that even when qualifications are equivalent, employers weigh reputational risk and organisational liability, often privileging applicants without a conviction. Pressures such as these are intensified in an era of digital transparency. In such context, employing a person with a conviction becomes a socially mediated decision, whereby the fear of secondary scrutiny discourages inclusion even when competence is evident.

Simonne’s experience exemplifies this reality. “They have come back to me the next day and say I’m sorry, we can’t give you the job.” Despite performing well in interviews, her disclosure of prior media exposure led to the withdrawal of employment offers, illustrating how digital punishment transforms stigma into a structural barrier to employment. Such mechanisms ensure that the consequences of conviction extend well beyond formal sanctions, often recasting the formerly incarcerated as irredeemably criminal.

While limited employment opportunities were a recurring feature across the study, women connected to structured reintegration services, were disproportionately more likely to benefit from facilitated pathways into employment. Barriers to employment were experienced

unevenly, often shaped by reintegration pathways and corresponding access to social capital. Participants pursuing independent reintegration tended to travel roads of less resistance, gravitating away from interpersonal roles.

Following several years in the construction industry, Kasey pivoted her career toward peer support. Initially discouraged by others who claimed her criminal record would preclude youth work, Kasey recounted how a mentor challenged this perception. “She told me, ‘Don’t you take no for an answer!’ I did up a CV, handed it in, and had an interview the following week.” Continued mentorship through a structured reintegration pathway (see also Chapter Four) broadened Kasey’s employment prospects by reshaping her perceptions of employability, underscoring the role of social capital in offsetting structural disadvantage.

An exception to this pattern, was Julia’s experience. After choosing a supported accommodation pathway she was mentored directly into peer support training and employment upon release. “He gets excited, jumps up and down, wants to take me into the industry.” She described this transition as “hitting the ground running.” However, her trajectory was soon derailed when media exposure of her case prompted the organisation to terminate her position. Julia expressed both disappointment and critical insight into what she perceived as the selective valorisation of “lived experience” within the sector. “What youse don’t actually mention is what you’re looking for is not full-blown lived experience. You’re looking for drug addiction lived experience.” Julia was referring to the circumstances surrounding her case, which extend beyond the commonly recognised trajectory of addiction.

Several participants articulated a desistance process, socially constrained by the enduring accessibility of digital records which undermine credibility and trustworthiness in the eyes of potential employers. Such challenges were particularly pronounced for high-profile women in the study, whose convictions had been widely documented through sensationalised media coverage. When a conviction becomes a ‘story’, the perceived risk for

employers is magnified within a social climate which continues to associate the individual with the offence. The persistence of digital traceability was found to effectively re-criminalise participants in the public sphere, reproducing the stigma of criminality despite sustained desistance. In this sense, the findings demonstrate how contemporary technologies extend and intensify the reach of stigma.

Despite the enduring stigma associated with a criminal record, participants across this study reported few difficulties securing employment, when they limited their ambitions to what Opsal (2012, p. 388) term “felon-friendly” opportunities, roles typically situated outside regulated professions.

Conclusion

This chapter has traced how employment functions within women’s desistance journeys revealing that workplace roles carry different meaning and effects across the life course. Women in this study found employment during midlife to be particularly potent providing a stabilising rhythm which contrasted sharply with the normalised chaos associated with their earlier years. In early adulthood, employment held little protective value, mainly due to its influence being weakened by addiction. Yet when employment intersected with readiness for change, it becomes a central support for roads of redemption.

Employment provided a platform for social reintegration where moral identities could be performed and consolidated. Within workplaces women encountered trust and responsibility, qualities which signalled a sense of belonging within conventional society. Workplaces were often the first experience of inclusion within a moral community, supporting sustainable change through workplace roles and interpersonal relationships.

The stigma of a criminal record is a key barrier to employment, limiting opportunities and curbing ambitions. This study showed stigma to be exacerbated by digital punishment, the contemporary reality of permanent publicly accessible online media. The stigma

associated with a criminal record is intensified by digital punishment, with employers' willingness to hire increasingly influenced by reputational risk in an era of heightened public visibility.

Three key contributions to the field include advancing a gendered and locally grounded understanding of the role of employment of desistance journeys, highlighting how women in Aotearoa New Zealand mobilise workplace roles for personal stability alongside moral and relational repair. Secondly it reveals that 'quality' employment is characterised by a sense of purpose and interpersonal connection as opposed to economic significance. This type of employment acts as a significant desistance resource in the form of social and human capital. Thirdly, this study underscores the value of structured reintegration services in bridging women into employment and self-sufficiency. Findings show the social capital of such services can serve to mitigate structural disadvantage.

Institutional constraints and systemic barriers can significantly restrict the upward mobility of formerly incarcerated women, despite substantial efforts to demonstrate change. As evidenced by the narratives, participants frequently moderated their aspirations in anticipation of inescapable stigma and systemic barriers, accepting these constraints as permanent features of their futures and demonstrating a reality in which the repercussions of their past were effectively lifelong. Criminological evidence demonstrates that individuals who remain conviction-free for seven to eight years are no more likely to reoffend than people without a prior conviction (Kurlychek et al., 2006; Blumstein & Nakamura, 2009) suggesting that persistent punishment through the collateral effects of criminal records can impose a disproportionate barrier to upward mobility. The present study supports the stance of Maruna and colleagues (2004), who argue that policy makers hold responsibility for incentivising desistance by setting the bar high, but not unreasonably so.

As a result of research findings, this study reveals the need for policy reform in relation to the Criminal Records (Clean Slate) Act 2004. Under the current legislation, individuals who have remained conviction-free for seven years and who have not received a custodial sentence are eligible to have their criminal records concealed. However, this criterion excludes formerly incarcerated individuals, effectively disqualifying women who have served prison sentences despite long-term desistance. While it is acknowledged that few women would actively seek concealment, this study recommends that the New Zealand Government consider amending the Clean Slate Act to incentivise valuable community contribution. Such reform would acknowledge the social value of sustained desistance and may help prevent younger women from internalising stigma or cycling through the criminal justice system by affirming the possibility of a meaningful second chance.

It is proposed that the exclusionary criteria be reviewed to allow individuals who have remained conviction-free for at least seven years, and who can demonstrate substantial evidence of positive social contribution, to apply for record concealment. Reform of the Clean Slate Act 2004 would not vacate convictions but would instead establish a structured application process for the suppression of criminal records from public access.

Comparative models, such as Colorado's approach to sealing criminal convictions, offer useful guidance. Under that framework, eligibility is determined not solely by the seriousness of the offence but also by considerations including the passage of time, evidence of rehabilitation, and the ongoing risk to public safety (Colorado Judicial Branch, 2024). Adopting a similarly balanced approach in Aotearoa New Zealand would mitigate the risk that rigid exclusionary criteria continue to overlook individuals with significant potential for positive social contribution.

Chapter Six: Education

Literature examining the links between education and desistance remains limited, with few studies directly exploring how learning impacts the transition away from offending. While the evidence base is modest, available findings indicate a positive association between education and reduced criminal behaviour, supported by an emerging recognition that engagement with educational institutions increases the stakes of conformity (Sampson & Laub, 2007; Weaver, 2015). More recent contributions extend this reasoning, emphasising education's role in building "personal capacity and hope for the future" (Bushway & Uggen, 2021, p. 39).

The adage "you don't know, what you don't know" was evident across participants' narratives. Childhoods shaped by poverty, abuse and instability meant that legitimate alternatives were rarely visible. Within families and communities where offending was normalised, crime was not perceived as deviant but as an extension of everyday life. In such contexts, conventional pathways were abstract, with few available reference points for what success outside of crime might look like.

Notably, all but one of the women interviewed for this research described leaving school before forming a clear, coherent adult pathway, a condition Bushway and Uggen (2021) refer to as a "crisis of moratorium" (p. 51). In developmental psychology, moratorium denotes the stage in which young people experiment with different roles and identities before committing to directed futures. In his seminal study, Marcia (1966) characterised the moratorium stage as a period of crisis or uncertainty, marked by "an active struggle to make commitments" (p. 552). Across this study, disrupted schooling, limited labour market participation, and social marginalisation displaced this normative process, producing fractured or suspended identity formation. Within this context, education emerged as means of restoring agency and reframing the self.

This chapter therefore positions education as a significant factor in shaping women's desistance from crime. It supports earlier research highlighting the contribution of education to human and social capital (Rodermond et al., 2016) and identity development (Bushway & Uggen, 2021), while extending the discussion through the lived experiences of women in Aotearoa New Zealand. The following sections examine how education operates across multiple domains of change which include enhancing human capital, making sense of the past, developing self-efficacy and restoring cultural identity. Finally, it turns to the uneven landscape of educational access and outcomes, showing how structural barriers and personal circumstances mediate the extent to which education functions to 'knife off' the past (Burt, 2020).

Against the backdrop of life experiences as identified in the introduction, adult education played a crucial role in supporting desistance by improving human capital in the form of knowledge, skills and new perspectives. Education illuminated possibilities for alternative lifestyles which had previously been obscured, thereby restoring a sense of agency and opening pathways to self-determined futures. Through learning, participants came to recognise what they had never realised could be known.

All twelve participants engaged in some form of adult education while in prison, ranging from secondary and tertiary qualifications to vocational and industry training. Four women pursued tertiary study in fields such as business studies, entrepreneurship, human development, adolescent development, and psychology. More than half completed NZQA-accredited qualifications in hospitality, animal care, fitness, and groundskeeping, which later served as bridges to legitimate employment on release. In these cases, informal and formal learning alike amplified women's capacity to realise potential and participate in society, aligning with Runell's (2017) argument that education promotes desistance by building human capital and enhancing self-worth.

Making sense of the past

A significant theme emerging from participants' narratives was the way education furnished the women with conceptual frameworks through which they could examine and reinterpret their pasts. This was most apparent among women who pursued tertiary study in psychology, wellbeing and human development, across both custodial and community contexts. Engagement with relevant theories provided lenses through which participants critically analysed the social and structural forces which had shaped their life histories. Through these perspectives, experiences of harm and marginalisation were reinterpreted in ways which alleviated the burden of personal failure. Women described how this process enabled them to recognise intergenerational cycles of harm, question the normalisation of offending, and develop a deeper understanding of themselves.

My thinking changed, and I just saw the whole world differently. So, I just kept working on myself... and I did that through work and studies. It was quite empowering because I realised I wasn't stupid. I did a Bachelor of Applied Sciences in Psychology... Doing my studies has kind of helped me to be able to understand more. (Simonne)

This process of reinterpretation was central to dismantling offender identities and creating conditions for the emergence of new, non-offending selves. Ten years prior to the interview, Simonne completed a degree while incarcerated, gaining personal insight and a sense of capability. Yet, without adequate structural support on release, and while still grappling with addiction, her reintegration was unstable and marked by repeated parole breaches. Over time, however, she was able to mobilise the durable resources education had provided to form a legitimate lifestyle and re-engage with tertiary study. Simonne's experience emphasises that while education may not yield immediate desistance, it creates lasting resources which can be drawn upon once circumstances permit.

Charlene was one of six participants who described growing up in environments where survival was sustained through criminal means, shaping earlier perceptions of what was 'normal' and attainable. She reflected on previous terms of imprisonment indicating that rehabilitative opportunities had been scarce, offering little exposure to alternative pathways. While serving her most recent sentence however, she began to disrupt this trajectory by completing her NCEA qualifications, before advancing to undergraduate study in the final year of her sentence.

That one paper [Human Development] ... made me so aware of all these things that had gone wrong in my life... the intergenerational type of crime that we were raised in...And what we all seen as normal, actually wasn't normal. (Charlene)

Charlene described how understanding the structural conditions of her past ignited her determination to model an alternative lifestyle for her younger siblings, nephews and nieces, "They need to know they have options...if not me, than who."

Kasey similarly reinterpreted past experiences through new knowledge and self-awareness. "I can write something about myself and use Erikson's development stages to see where I went wrong... I was cognitively delayed, you know? I can see that now."

Education shifted Kasey's interpretive lens from a reactive or survivalist worldview toward one grounded in understanding which suggests that transformative learning fundamentally supports secondary desistance, where the individual reconstructs their identity and views themselves as capable of change.

Self-efficacy

Education was observed to alter participants' outlooks on crime by strengthening their sense of self-efficacy. A common feature among participants, was the private stigma and long-standing self-doubt which compounded feelings of inadequacy, positioning crime as a

familiar strategy for survival. Educational achievement disrupted these narratives by evidencing competence and capability.

The process of completing assignments, passing courses, and attaining qualifications provided a means to consolidate and internalise emerging identities.

I think I'm not smart enough or not good enough. Having to manage that and being like, actually you are, just relax, you've done the work. Then you get a good result and you're like, see! (Charlene)

I had my own beliefs, why I wasn't good enough and wasn't smart enough.

But when I started to receive like positive affirmation in those spaces ... I loved that stuff. It was my trigger for change. (Kasey)

Soon after commencing her studies at Wintec upon release, Kasey secured an internship which subsequently developed into an apprenticeship. Her employers recognised her value with a full-time job offer and a set of tools, a gesture Kasey recalls as a powerful affirmation of her potential. She later expanded her educational pursuits, taking up a peer support role in the community and enrolling in tertiary study to further strengthen her practice. Education frequently provided the human and social capital (skills and network) to challenge long-held limiting beliefs.

I just did it because I was grateful for the opportunity, and I wanted them to see me for who [mentor] believed I could be. I was still figuring out if I could be this person... what she seen in me... I still didn't see it back then. I was like, if she believes in me, there must be something good. I had never had someone believe in me. (Kasey)

Kasey's narrative illustrates the scaffolding effect of education on women in the process of desistance, particularly through the enhancement of social capital which supports the maintenance of change. Giordano et al. (2002) contend that desistance is often sustained

by the motivating force of others' belief, which can precede the individual's own internalisation of that belief. Desisters frequently attribute their transformation to the faith others placed in their potential for change. Within this context, Kasey's account highlights education as a transformative mechanism cultivating both cognitive and emotional maturation.

Rona identified childhood poverty as a central driver of her offending. At the time of the interview, she was thirty-eight years old and had been caught in cycles of harm and addiction for twenty-six years. After completing a series of qualifications, including Peer Support 101, Level 4 Bicultural Social Services, Traffic Control Management, and He Te Wānanga Level 4, she secured her first affirming role in the community as a peer support. In this way, education operated as a potent hook for change (Giordano et al., 2002; Farley & Hopkins, 2018), an opportunity which not only invited a shift toward pro-social values but also positioned her within structured environments supporting prosocial commitments. Rona's increasing openness to change converged with accessible and meaningful opportunities, enabling her to put new perspectives into practice and actively reshape her future.

Learning environments provided more than credentials, they offered routine, recognition, and access to recovery capital in the form of people, places, and practices which support efforts to desist. These are core features of what Sampson and Laub (1993) conceptualise as informal social control, and the notion that as desisters invest in conventional roles and responsibilities, the rewards of conformity increase while the incentives and opportunities for offending diminish.

Findings of the present study show attachment to institutions (social capital) can foster a sense of accountability, motivating individuals to avoid behaviours which may disappoint those they value. Furthermore, commitment to conventional roles and

responsibilities, such as stable employment (see Chapter Five) or educational achievement, were shown to deter offending, as individuals become less willing to jeopardise the investments they have made in their future.

Restoring Cultural Identity

This study found that exposure to mātauranga Māori (Māori knowledge) within custodial settings marked the beginning of secondary desistance for more than half the Māori wāhine in this study. Kasey, Charlene, Rona, and Vee, acknowledged Māori cultural components of prison programmes, such as whakapapa, waiata, and kapa haka, were particularly significant in providing opportunities for self-discovery which had been previously unavailable to them. This engagement not only supported a process of rediscovering their Māori identities, but it also stimulated a greater interest in education.

Consistent with Durie's (1997) work, the findings of this study indicate that a positive cultural identity promotes individual wellbeing, through the strengthening of identity. Durie (1997) notes that "Not all Māori subscribe to the same cultural values and beliefs.... not all enjoy the same access to Māori society" (p. 28) highlighting that knowledge of language and culture, and access to te ao Māori, is often regarded as a lifelong process.

Kasey moved beyond what Durie (1997) terms a "notional identity" (p. 26), in which Māori may not self-identify due to limited access to Māori society, towards a consolidated prosocial identity which affirmed a sense of belonging in the spaces she occupied. This shift reflects secondary (identity) and tertiary (relational) processes of desistance, cultivated through her participation in education. Formal education offered Kasey the means to reinterpret her life through a broader historical and cultural lens, integrating an awareness of colonisation with reconnection to whakapapa (ancestry).

I'm Māori but... I didn't identify myself as anything. It was easier to just say

I was white because... my skin was white. I couldn't pronounce Aotearoa... I

couldn't pronounce Ngāti Pouro...But now, I can say my pepeha...I know my Maunga. It doesn't even matter if I don't know or I can't speak, because I think about colonisation, the loss of language... the troubles and abuse my ancestors and tupuna experienced because of colonisation and being whipped and beaten because of speaking Reo... it got lost. (Kasey)

At the point of interview, Kasey revealed she was in the process of developing her own reintegration model, integrating insights from personal lived experience and kaupapa Māori health frameworks such as Te Whare Tapa Whā and Te Wheke.

Charlene described a growing sense of pride in feeling competent across various environments, a transformation she associated with reconnecting to her ancestry and developing familiarity with Māori customs. She described the role education played in sparking the curiosity and equipping her with the knowledge required to rediscover her Māori identity and to restore relational ties.

Singing the waiata, finding my whakapapa, my pepeha, cos I didn't know any of that stuff until I got to prison...it made me reach out to extended family members, it gave me that belonging and connection. It helped me find who I am, shape my identity and create this new person I am becoming. (Charlene)

Similarly, education facilitated Vee's reconnection with culture, reinforcing prosocial values and a commitment to change.

When I was in prison, with a lot more time on my hands, I did my tikanga Māori certificates. Even now in my life, I still try to build on that side of me because I know the values and the discipline, that the culture brings. I think I connected with culture during the worst part of my life and that tikanga aligned with the new person I was becoming. (Vee)

By applying the qualifications she had gained in peer support, Rona came to recognise the benefits of extending her education to further strengthen her professional capacity. At the time of the interview, she was undertaking Level 4 mātauranga Māori and emphasised that learning about the Treaty of Waitangi had given her substantial insight into the effects of colonisation, insight which was directly relevant to the challenges she observed in her daily work with homeless populations. Such findings correspond with scholarship which frames education as central to the desistance process (Segev, 2020). By helping individuals locate authentic aspects of their identity, education can support the development of resilience to the enduring impacts of marginalisation (George et al., 2014).

Despite participants highlighting the transformative potential of cultural engagement, these opportunities were often sporadic and peripheral as evidenced in the following section.

Uneven Landscape

Several women indicated that while education can open doors, it does not automatically dismantle systemic barriers which arise when it comes time to transfer skills into the workforce. Even individuals who achieve significant academic success often find that these credentials do not translate into meaningful employment. Concerns of this nature were realised for Christy, who initially credited formal education as a significant factor in her desistance journey but ultimately encountered limitations. “Everything I wanted to study, I couldn’t become anything from it. So, I looked at it like a waste of time.” Narratives across this study highlighted that systemic inequities eroded any confidence that education could lead to meaningful outcomes.

The majority of women impacted by the criminal justice system have had so little exposure to education (Banks, 2017) and carry very little appetite for it. Education often feels foreign, intimidating, or simply irrelevant to their survival. Whilst most participants in this study engaged with some form of custodial education, their efforts were found to be

less about a deliberate pursuit of qualifications and more about a means of using time constructively or joining in with positive activities. This was particularly evident across industry training and initiatives like the University of Waikato (UoW) entrepreneurship paper, both delivered in cohort settings. Such examples emphasise the importance of effectuating the right conditions for women to engage in education whilst in prison. Opportunities were most readily taken up when programmes integrated practical and social components and offered substantial pedagogical support.

In contrast, custodial-based tertiary study was generally experienced as a more solitary endeavour and was disproportionately undertaken by women serving longer sentences. Access to, progression toward, and sustained engagement with education at this level were closely linked to the stability and continuity afforded by a long-term sentence. Conversely, women on shorter sentences often lacked conditions compatible with tertiary pathways, which points to a structural paradox. Those with the greatest opportunity to access higher education in prison are typically individuals serving the longest sentences for the most serious convictions. While those with shorter sentences, who are likely to benefit equally, if not more, are often excluded. The potential for education provided in a correctional space to serve as a hook for change remains far less feasible for women serving short custodial sentences.

A study by Richards (2014) shows that formal education occupies a marginal position in Aotearoa New Zealand prisons. The present study reinforces that observation, finding that formal education across both custodial and community platforms was rarely perceived as valuable. Maggie, Leanne, Vee and Jasmine regarded the education system as a system designed for others rather than for themselves. Furthermore, the necessity of attending to urgent concerns, such as child welfare and custody matters, financial constraints, health

challenges, the stresses of confinement, and the uncertainty of impending release, consistently diverted their attention.

Despite evidence that cultural identity and connection act as powerful catalysts for secondary desistance, current Correctional frameworks deprioritise Mātauranga Māori. Across the women's narratives exposure to Māori knowledge, whakapapa, waiata, and kapa haka often marked the beginning of identity restoration and positive change. Yet in practice, the prison environment treats Mātauranga Māori as something to be contained within exclusive, elective and separate units or wings. While these culturally dedicated spaces are well-intentioned, they frequently become internally segregating and logistically unsustainable. In 2010 Minister Kelvin Davis announced a \$10.1 million dollar Government investment including the launch of Wāhine Māori Pathways at Christchurch Women's Prison (Beehive, 2021; Young, 2021). However, the Christchurch Women's Māori unit eventually dissipated due to participation limiting women's access to jobs and other prison-wide opportunities. The structure of the unit, in terms of daily schedule, restricted participants capacity to engage in multiple rehabilitative pathways simultaneously, creating a trade-off between cultural participation and economic or vocational opportunities. By confining Māori worldviews to select spaces, Corrections unintentionally creates internal divisions and undermines the transformative potential of cultural identity work. The literature captures many critical truths about education's transformative potential, but its practical application inside Aotearoa New Zealand prisons remains fragmented and inconsistent.

In recounting the start of her tertiary studies, Charlene emphasised that during the final year of her sentence she had access to only three subject options. Her experience illustrates how the replacement of previous materials with digital learning in wider society has, paradoxically, contributed to shrinking educational opportunities in prison, due to the lack of online materials where Corrections has struggled to modernise provision. She

described the challenge of completing assignments when access to academic literature was restricted to a single hour per week in a secure online suite. During this time, she was dependent on tutors to locate and print relevant sources, while they simultaneously managed the competing demands of a dozen other women seeking assistance with tasks such as CV preparation or Parole Board submissions. Conditions such as these exemplify the ways in which the custodial environment is inconducive to effect learning outcomes.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this research both confirms and complicates international understandings of education as a protective factor in desistance (Lochner & Moretti, 2004; Boyce et al, 2016; Szifris et al., 2018). Informal and formal education, across both custodial and community platforms, was shown to stimulate identity work, generate valuable insights and improve access to normative networks of support. Its effectiveness, however, was contingent on the intersection of personal agency and readiness, alongside the availability of structural opportunities, both within custodial settings and upon release. When these factors align, education has the potential to significantly contribute to women's pathways away from crime.

It was equally apparent that translating the human and social capital generated through education into substantive outcomes was fraught with challenges. Māori focus units operate exclusively, with limited capacity, offering an adjunct to rehabilitation rather than a foundational pathway toward restoring identity, dignity, and belonging.

The value of education was not easily recognised by women themselves, nor by custodial frameworks poorly aligned with contemporary realities. The sense of futility was reflected in the narratives, a perception reinforced by shrinking custodial provisions and restricted proxy-use of the internet (Reisdorf & Jewkes, 2016). A misalignment between outdated custodial provisions and contemporary realities, as illustrated in this study,

underscores an absence of responsible education-based digital access which is likely to reproduce exclusion, and further undermine the very “potential” which corrections are strategically aligned to support (Department of Corrections, 2021. p. 8).

This chapter has shown how both informal and formal education can stimulate secondary desistance for women, particularly through altering perspectives, and facilitating the development of self-efficacy. Present study findings enrich the literature by investigating a relatively underexplored strand of desistance research, foregrounding education as a resource with transformative potential.

Building on these insights, this section identifies five key implications which speak directly to both policy reform and practice innovation in Aotearoa New Zealand, while also offering considerations which may hold relevance for international debates on prison education and desistance.

Research findings have signalled a pressing need to address the digital divide (Knight et al., 2024), strengthen incentives and optimise the delivery of custodial-based education as a means of aiding secondary desistance. Firstly, thinking beyond conventional risk-averse frameworks, expanding responsible digitisation and integrating digital technologies within the prison environment could significantly enhance access to learning platforms and reduce the intimidation many women associate with education. Aotearoa New Zealand continues to lag behind comparable jurisdictions such as Canada, which has introduced restricted and monitored digital access within prisons specifically for educational purposes (Woodward, 2025). Furthermore, a pilot programme in the United States has demonstrated the potential of digital innovation to promote learning and rehabilitation within correctional settings. As Miller (2021) reports, this initiative enabled participants routine access to secure tablets, supported through partnerships with higher education providers and prospective employers. Incarcerated individuals were able to earn “micro-badges” at their own pace across domains

such as life-readiness, education-readiness, and work-readiness (p. 27). These achievements were formally recognised by employers, who were incentivised to recruit formerly incarcerated individuals. Allocating additional funding and resources to Corrections is essential for modernising current provisions and ensuring parity with mainstream educational frameworks.

Secondly, a culturally grounded approach should inform the ethos and daily rhythm of the entire prison environment rather than framing access to tikanga as a privilege for a limited few. If education and Mātauranga Māori were core mandatory elements delivered by skilled mentors assigned to guide women through relevant and connected learning pathways, we could begin to see real outcomes. Improving the custodial education climate is essential to embed a culture supportive of learning. This would represent a fundamental shift in terms of operation, moving from peripheral offerings toward structured, culturally grounded, outcome-driven pathways which offer women genuine choices upon release.

Thirdly, this mentorship model must include continuity post-release. Former Corrections Minister Kelvin Davis stated, “Supporting women from when they enter the system to when they leave will help break the intergenerational cycle of Māori reoffending and enhance community safety and wellbeing” (Beehive, 2021). Such a claim overlooks the systemic gap created when institutional support ends abruptly at the prison gate (see Chapter Four), leaving women to navigate a complex and often unsympathetic landscape in isolation. This study proposes that post-release advocacy become a formalised function within reintegration systems, suggesting that Wāhine Māori Pathways initiatives expand to include dedicated transitional mentors.

Fourthly, introducing a student allowance aligned with custodial wages (typically 20–40 cents per hour) could incentivise formal education and elevate its perceived value within prison. Women frequently favour custodial employment over education because the

associated income enables access to personal items such as toiletries. Establishing a formal allowance would challenge the current economic hierarchy of prison labour, positioning education as an equally viable form of rehabilitative work.

Finally, given participants perspectives of the “tick-box” criteria acknowledged by the Parole Board (see Chapter Four), the explicit recognition of educational achievements in deliberations could provide a powerful incentive for engagement. If implemented consistently, these reforms hold the potential to improve custodial culture around education and amplify its role in supporting meaningful desistance outcomes.

Chapter Seven: From Evidence to Action

This concluding chapter brings together the core contributions of the thesis and reflects on their implications for scholarship, policy, and practice. It is organised into four sections. The first provides a research summary, synthesising the central findings of the study and situating them within broader desistance literature. Drawing on the narratives of twelve formerly incarcerated women in Aotearoa New Zealand, this section reiterates that desistance is a complex, iterative, and socially contingent process, shaped by identity transformation, healing, and access to meaningful relational and structural support. By centring women's voices, the chapter highlights both the resonance of established desistance theories and the persistent institutional gaps which continue to constrain women's pathways out of crime.

The second section addresses the limitations of the research, acknowledging methodological, interpretive, and scope-related constraints inherent in qualitative narrative inquiry. While the small, purposive sample limits generalisability, the depth and richness of participants' accounts provide valuable insight into desistance processes which are often obscured within quantitative research. The chapter then turns to future research directions, identifying key areas requiring further empirical attention, particularly the need for cross-agency and longitudinal research examining how correctional, community, and relational systems interact to support or undermine women's desistance journeys. Finally, the chapter presents a set of recommendations informed by the study's findings. These recommendations advocate for trauma-informed, culturally grounded, and relationally responsive correctional and reintegration frameworks capable of supporting women's desistance and disrupting intergenerational cycles of harm.

Research Summary

This thesis has demonstrated that desistance is a complex, iterative, and socially contingent process, while responding to the urgent need to centre the voices of women impacted by the criminal justice system as legitimate contributors to the knowledge which shapes policy and practice. By positioning identity as a central mechanism of change, the study foregrounds the internal dimensions of desistance alongside the structural and relational conditions which enable or constrain it. Drawing on the narratives of twelve women striving to break cycles of harm, the research illustrates a strong alignment between established desistance theories and lived experience, while simultaneously exposing persistent gaps in institutional responsiveness. In doing so, it advances desistance knowledge that is accessible, relevant, and actionable for those tasked with supporting change.

Situated in Aotearoa New Zealand, where Māori women face disproportionate incarceration stemming from colonial legacies, this research captures the experiences of midlife women whose criminal involvement began in early adolescence. Participants' offending histories included fraud, robbery, theft, Class A drug dealing, and attempted murder. In many respects, these narratives reflect the final wave of a generation shaped by earlier punitive and deficit-based justice models, and by a social landscape characterised by the amplification of organised crime, gang affiliation, and widespread methamphetamine use. These accounts offer insight into how historical justice responses and broader social conditions continue to shape women's pathways into, through, and beyond the criminal justice system.

The findings highlight the central roles of healing, self-determination and supportive social relationships in shaping desistance as a process which unfolds along a continuum. A process characterised by progress, setbacks, and ongoing negotiation within systems which often fail to make pathways toward recovery and reintegration visible or attainable. While

participants had remained conviction-free for extended periods, the study found that crime free lifestyles were maintained over a far shorter timeframe, indicating that recovery from addiction frequently marks the entry point to desistance. Recovery, however, was frequently challenged by unresolved trauma, alongside continued exposure to criminogenic environments. Notably, responsibility for addressing trauma was commonly deferred to the post-release period, effectively transferring the burden of psychological recovery onto women navigating hazardous reintegration landscapes.

Employment emerged as a critical stabilising and transformative force within women's desistance journeys. Particularly in midlife, when employment intersected with readiness for change, it provided structure, routine, and opportunities for identity consolidation. Workplace roles enabled women to enact moral and prosocial identities, experience inclusion within conventional society, and build relational trust. At the same time, enduring stigma was found to constrain employment aspirations and opportunities, with forms of digital punishment intensifying exclusion.

Education was found to stimulate secondary desistance, though its effectiveness was contingent on both personal readiness and structural opportunity. Participants' narratives framed education less as a pathway to formal credentials and more as a process of healing, self-discovery, and identity reconstruction. Through learning, women reinterpreted past experiences, reconnected with cultural identity, and developed self-efficacy. The study reveals systemic inequities within custodial education, including the siloing of Mātauranga Māori, the shrinking of educational provision, and lack of digitisation, all of which undermine education's potential to support desistance outcomes.

Central to these findings is the need for critical reflection on whether contemporary correctional structures genuinely facilitate healing and identity transformation, or whether they inadvertently defer the work essential for desistance. The study demonstrates that

equitable outcomes depend on sustained institutional commitment to equipping women with knowledge, relational support, and meaningful opportunities. The recommendations advanced in this thesis seek to incentivise desistance, affirm social value, and counter the enduring impacts of stigma by supporting the formation and stabilisation of new identities. Collectively, these findings call for a decisive shift away from punitive, deficit-based approaches toward trauma-informed, relational, and culturally responsive systems capable of supporting women to disrupt intergenerational cycles of harm and criminalisation in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Limitations

This project was not designed to extract objective truths but to honour participants' narratives in whatever form or version they chose to share in the moment. It acknowledges that accounts are always partial, situated, and shaped by the context of their present telling (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2019). While this research contributes to understanding women's desistance from crime in Aotearoa New Zealand, several limitations must be acknowledged, primarily relating to the study's scope, methodology, and interpretive nature.

The small, purposively selected sample of twelve formerly incarcerated women significantly limits the generalisability of the findings. Qualitative narrative inquiry privileges depth over breadth (Creswell & Poth, 2018), and while this approach illuminates lived realities, it does not permit generalisation across women in Aotearoa New Zealand prison.

It is worth noting that the study captures participants' reflections at a single point in time. The women in this study had already made notable progress in their desistance journeys, demonstrated motivation and were mostly stable at the time of the interviews. Nevertheless, the depth and richness of the data provide valuable insight into the processes of desistance which counterbalance the lack of generalisability.

Desistance is an ongoing and potentially reversible process. Although participants had maintained conviction-free lives for varying periods of time, the study cannot determine whether desistance will be permanent or how their journeys may evolve over time. Furthermore, this unique set of women not only had the ability to self-reflect, they were also willing to share their experiences and possessed the benefit of hindsight through which to frame and interpret their experiences. Participants may have unconsciously reinterpreted past events in light of their current stability, a phenomenon known as retrospective bias (Chand, 2025). Taking this into consideration it is important to highlight, the sample underrepresents women experiencing acute mental health challenges, fails to capture the full ethnic diversity of women in prison, excludes the perspectives of younger women and may differ markedly in terms of offence type and socioeconomic context.

This study employed narrative inquiry to privilege participants' voices. While this approach aligns with interpretivist traditions, it carries several methodological limitations. First, the semi-structured interview format often led to conversational digressions which, although rich in insight, meant that not all key topics were explored consistently across participants. Second, the inherently interpretive nature of language meant that participants' understanding of key concepts, particularly "desistance" varied. Efforts to mitigate this by substituting the term desistance with "change" proved only partially effective, as "change" failed to capture desistance's temporal and processual dimensions. Third, the recruitment method introduced a degree of sampling bias, as participants were often those most willing to share positive narratives of transformation. Fourth, the relational dynamic with participants as a researcher with shared lived experiences of incarceration and membership within the formerly incarcerated community were likely to have produced both insight and constraint. Whilst facilitating trust and depth of disclosure, this dynamic may also have limited critical distance and discouraged the sharing of certain aspects of their stories. Despite deliberate

reflexive strategies such as journaling and supervisory debriefing, the interpretive authority of the researcher inevitably influenced data selection, thematic emphasis, and the overall representation of participants' stories.

As with most qualitative studies, the subjective and interpretive nature of this research limits verifiability in the positivist sense. Manual thematic coding, although thorough and iterative, was guided by interpretive judgment rather than algorithmic precision (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Furthermore, case-centric research embedded in relational trust is inherently non-replicable, as each interaction is context-specific and co-constructed between researcher and participant (Denscombe, 2009). While this study generated valuable insight by privileging women's voices and illuminating their experiences, constraints in terms of scope were identified. Specifically, the research did not extend to a detailed examination of correctional policies or rehabilitative interventions, thereby limiting its immediate applicability for system-level reform. Moreover, the exclusion of perspectives from reintegration service providers, probation officers, employers, and whānau, who each play integral roles in shaping desistance ecologies were beyond the parameters of a master's thesis. Finally, several rich insights related to tertiary desistance emerged from the narratives but exceeded the capacity of this thesis and warrant future publication.

Future Research

There remains a pressing need for empirical research examining how policy initiatives and correctional practices in Aotearoa operationalise desistance principles within real-world contexts. This study recommends future research to evaluate the pathways available to women within Corrections, analysing how educational, therapeutic, and cultural interventions interact to cultivate readiness for release. Equally important is understanding how these internal pathways connect with external systems (such as housing, employment, and community-based reintegration services) to ensure continuity of support. A cross-agency

evaluation would illuminate the extent to which collaborative practices enable desistance, providing evidence to inform more coherent, gender-responsive, and effective rehabilitation strategies.

Future studies should also engage the perspectives of whānau, reintegration service providers, Corrections and Probation staff, as these circles of influence play integral roles in shaping desistance ecologies. Incorporating these relational voices would deepen the understanding of the social mechanisms through which change is supported, recognised, or constrained. Insights from practitioners and community stakeholders could also reveal organisational challenges and structural barriers which influence post-release outcomes. Collectively, these perspectives would situate desistance within a broader social ecology, illustrating that sustained change depends not only on individual transformation but also on the responsiveness of the relational, institutional, and systemic environments which surround women upon release.

Recommendations

1. This study recommends the formal evaluation of the correctional system to assess whether existing structures inadvertently impede the healing and transformative processes essential to desistance.
2. Promote equitable desistance outcomes through:
 - sustained institutional commitment to closing information gaps.
 - bridging custodial and community care of individuals
 - extending current and new learning/knowledge in meaningful ways to benefit individuals working towards desistance.

3. Reimagine correctional frameworks to incorporate structured pre-release access to community-based institutions within reintegration planning to support the self-determined development of prosocial capital. These frameworks must include marae, recovery networks, fitness facilities, and whānau-led initiatives.
4. Reform the Criminal Records (Clean Slate) Act 2004 by reassessing exclusionary provisions to allow individuals who have completed custodial sentences, remaining conviction-free for a minimum of seven years, to apply for record concealment based on demonstrated positive social contribution.
5. Modernise custodial education provision within correctional settings by addressing the digital inequities and incentivising participation in formal education.
6. Integrate post-release advocacy as a core component of reintegration systems by scaling initiatives such as Wāhine Māori Pathways to include dedicated transitional mentors.
7. Embed a culturally grounded, tikanga-informed approach in the ethos and daily operations of prisons, to ensure cultural access is integrated, consistent, and not siloed.

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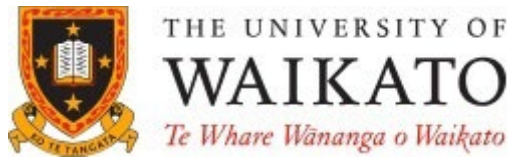
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Appendix A: Participant Information Sheet



Participant Information Sheet

Project Title: Pathways to Change

You are invited to take part in a research project which sets out to better understand Desistance from the perspective of formerly incarcerated women in New Zealand. This information sheet is set out to help you decide if you would like to take part.

Topic of the research

Desistance is a term used to describe the process of “going straight”. The aim of this research is to identify the range of factors that contribute to women transitioning from a life of crime to a crime-free lifestyle. This study is more interested in “what went right” than what went wrong. I want to know what helped you to get to where you are today.

Why are you inviting me?

You have been selected by the researcher as a female who has knowledge that would be valuable to include in this research project. I am interested to collect and understand your views and experiences.

Who is doing the research?

This project is being undertaken by Shannon Stevens, a master’s student in Sociology at the University of Waikato. Shannon’s research is being supervised by Dr Cate Curtis of UoW currently teaching Psychology.

What do participants in the research have to do?

Participation will involve approx. 60 min face to face session with the researcher. The researcher has some key themes for discussion; however, conversation will be relaxed and flexible. You can end the session any time you wish.

If you feel uncomfortable or distressed at any point, please let me know and the interview will be paused or terminated as needed. I understand reflecting on the past can sometimes be triggering. Your emotional wellbeing takes priority.

Is participation voluntary?

Participation is entirely voluntary. If you choose to take part and then change your mind, your decision will be accepted and respected. You can withdraw from the project at any time up to 2 weeks after receipt of the reviewed transcript. To withdraw from the project, you simply need to contact the researcher by phone or email, no explanation required. If we have started the recording process, everything will be deleted.

What else should I expect as a participant?

I will use an audio recorder during our session so I can capture your story accurately, in your words. I will write up the notes back at my office. I will send these to you once I have prepared the transcripts to give you the opportunity to make corrections or clarifications before signing to confirm your approval. Audio recordings will be permanently deleted upon receipt of the participant's signed confirmation of transcript accuracy.

How will I remain anonymous?

Information collected from your interview will be assigned a different name. Your actual details will never be used during this research. All data will be securely stored in a password protected file which is only accessible by the researcher.

What else do I need to know?

Participants are advised not to disclose details of incidents for which they have not been charged or convicted, as such disclosures may cause them harm. Details of offenses are not required for the purposes of this study. I particularly want to learn about your experiences in relation to "what has worked for you" on your journey toward a crime free life.

As the community of formerly incarcerated women is small, I further ask that your participation in this project remain confidential.

What will the research be used for?

Pathways to Change findings will help me to develop a better understanding of the factors that influence desistance for women in New Zealand. This study will not be published or used for anything other than an assessment purposes as an MSocSc thesis.

Concerns/Complaints Process

If you have any questions, concerns or complaints about this study, please do not hesitate to contact the leads below.

Doctor Cate Curtis. University of Waikato, School of Social Sciences, Hamilton, New Zealand. cate.curtis@waikato.ac.nz

This research project has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee at the University of Waikato as HREC. Any questions or concerns about the ethical conduct of this research may be sent to: Secretary, Human Research Ethics Committee, Te Whare Wānanga O Waikato / University of Waikato, Private Bag 3105 Hamilton 3240; Email: humanethics@waikato.ac.nz

Researcher: Shannon Stevens shannonstevens001@gmail.com 021 262 6204

Appendix B: Interview Schedule

Introduction

I'm doing a study is about desistance from crime. I'm interviewing 12 formerly incarcerated women to develop an understanding of what women in New Zealand go through when they are trying to direct their lifestyles away from crime.

There are no right or wrong answers, we are all completely different and I just want to learn what your experience was like. Tell me as little or as much as you want, this time is yours and I'm just here to listen.

I have some questions for you, some may not be relevant, some may be more relevant than others, but first let's go over the information sheet together.

(Sign Participant Consent Form)

Below is a guideline which may be adapted to the individual or direction of the interview.

What's happening in your life right now?

Can you tell me a bit about yourself?

How old are you?

What ethnicity do you identify as?

How old would you have been when your criminal lifestyle began?

What age would you have been at the time of your most recent offence, whether you were convicted of it or not?

What do you believe triggered your desire for change?

What helped you to achieve that change?

What challenges did you encounter?

Which of these factors stands out for you the most, in terms of your journey of change?

- Community Groups
- Religion
- Spirituality
- Spouse/Partner
- Children
- Whanāu/Family
- Education
- Employment
- Addiction

Prompts

Tell me more about that?

How did you find that experience?

Semi Structured Interview Questions

- What role (if any) have community groups or support networks played in your desistance journey?
- What role (if any) has a spouse played in your desistance journey?
- How (if at all) have your children affected your desistance journey?
- How have familial relationships contributed to your desistance journey?
- How significant has addiction been to your journey?
- Has geographical location (where you live) contributed to your lifestyle? If so, how?
- Has religion been significant for your desistance journey, and if so, how?
- Has education been significant for your desistance journey, and if so, how?
- Has employment been significant for your desistance journey, and if so, how?
- What challenges and barriers have you faced whilst trying to maintain a crime-free life?