

Volunteering at a Reentry Program: Reflections on Desistance Theory

Introduction

Six weeks of volunteering as a job application coach at a reentry program serving formerly incarcerated individuals in the spring of 2024 produced regular contact with people at various stages of what the academic literature calls desistance: the process of moving away from criminal behavior toward a conventional life. Desistance theory, developed most extensively by Maruna (2001) and Laub and Sampson (2003), holds that the shift away from offending is not simply a matter of stopping criminal behavior but involves a more fundamental transformation of personal identity and social bonds. This essay uses what I observed across six weeks of coaching sessions to examine which elements of desistance theory were visible in the experiences participants described and where the theory's predictions did not match what I encountered.

The Identity Change Narrative

Maruna's (2001) account of desistance centers on what he calls the "redemption script": a narrative through which formerly incarcerated individuals reframe their past as something that produced growth and make a claim to a new, prosocial identity. Among the participants I coached, this narrative was present but unevenly. Several spoke fluently about who they now were in contrast to who they had been, described their conviction as a turning point, and oriented their job search explicitly around a new self-concept. Others described the process in more transactional terms: they needed employment because they needed income, and the identity framing the theory describes was either absent or not visible in our interactions. The redemption narrative is a real phenomenon among desisting individuals, but it is not universal, and its absence did not appear to predict worse outcomes in the short coaching period I observed.

Social Bonds and Employment as a Turning Point

Laub and Sampson (2003) identify employment, marriage, and military service as the primary turning points through which desistance occurs, arguing that the social bonds created by these institutions provide the stakes in conformity and the structured routines that make continued offending less likely. Every participant I worked with identified

employment as the central goal and described it in exactly these terms: having a job meant having something to lose. The theory's prediction about the role of employment was well supported by what participants said. What the theory does not foreground — and what the coaching sessions made unmistakable — is how systematically the labor market is organized to prevent formerly incarcerated individuals from forming the very bond the theory identifies as necessary for desistance.

The Structural Gap the Theory Underweights

Background check policies, occupational licensing restrictions, and employer reluctance created concrete barriers for every participant I coached, regardless of their motivation, their narrative, or the quality of their application materials. Several held credentials from programs completed during incarceration that were not recognized by licensing boards. Others had been rejected at the application screening stage before any human review occurred. Desistance theory, particularly in its identity-focused variants, locates the primary mechanism of change inside the individual. What I observed located a significant portion of the problem outside the individual entirely, in institutional structures that the theory does not centrally address. Farrall and Calverley (2006) have noted this gap in the desistance literature, arguing for greater attention to the structural conditions that enable or prevent the bond formation the theory identifies as necessary.

Conclusion

Desistance theory describes the psychological and relational processes through which individuals move away from criminal involvement with considerable accuracy. What six weeks of reentry coaching revealed is that those processes are frequently interrupted not by the absence of motivation or the failure of identity transformation but by structural barriers that the theory does not centrally address. The participants I worked with understood that employment was a turning point they needed to reach; what prevented them from reaching it was not a failure of desistance but a labor market organized to exclude them. Reflecting on that gap between the theory's predictions and the structural realities participants described does not invalidate desistance theory but clarifies its scope: it is a theory of the internal process of desistance, not a theory of the conditions under which that process can succeed.