

## **The Ladder of Will: How Desistance Intention Shapes the Course of Crime**

Sz-yu Lai, Central Police University, Taiwan

The Asian Conference on the Social Sciences 2025  
Official Conference Proceedings

### **Abstract**

Considering inconsistent findings in existing research on crime desistance, this study aims to explore the process of individual desistance from crime. It seeks to identify key factors, their interrelationships, and their sequence of occurrence, as well as to explain the reasons for differing research outcomes. Adopting a qualitative research method, the study involved four participants, all of whom had past criminal records but had not committed any crimes in the five years prior to the interviews. Two participants were drawn from the longitudinal study by Shue et al. (1999) on early prediction of juvenile delinquency, while the other two were cohorts of the longitudinal study group. Through in-depth interviews, the following findings were made: (1) When individuals experience negative life events and associate them with their criminal behavior, these adverse outcomes are perceived as the cost of crime, leading to the development of an intention of desistance from crime. (2) The intention of desistance is a critical factor in successfully stopping criminal behavior, and individuals with varying levels of intentions exhibit different desisting processes. (3) Individuals with strong cessation intentions, often triggered by significant negative life events, display powerful agency and actively take concrete actions to sever criminal behavior. Those with weaker intentions undergo gradual changes in their circumstances, identity, and behavior through the interplay of external and internal factors, progressively reducing the frequency and severity of crimes until cessation is achieved.

*Keywords:* crime desistance, desistance intention, negative life events, costs of crime, agency

**iafor**

The International Academic Forum  
[www.iafor.org](http://www.iafor.org)

## Introduction

Research on crime desistance is a crucial component of criminology. According to Wolfgang et al. (1972), approximately 6% of offenders are chronic offenders who commit over half of all crimes and have longer criminal careers. However, when this research was published, most scholars focused on these persistent offenders, overlooking that the other 94% of offenders might spend more time in the desistance process after relatively shorter criminal careers. This research topic didn't begin developing until the 1990s, and there is still no comprehensive theory explaining crime desistance.

In criminology, there is no clear definition of desistance. At the same time, research on desistance faces challenges, especially in identifying suitable samples. Official records cannot confirm true desistance, and many desisters are unwilling to participate due to their desire to distance themselves from past crimes. Despite these challenges, understanding the causes and process of desistance is crucial for crime prevention. Most existing studies are cross-sectional, making it hard to determine long-term outcomes. This study uses a longitudinal approach, following participants from youth through adulthood. One group has been followed three times, showing long-term stability. Another group—peers from the same cohort—also desisted but followed different paths.

By comparing these two groups, this study highlights the diversity of desistance trajectories and helps researchers understand how key factors and transition processes differ among various desisting groups. This enables the classification and integration of existing desistance theories, thereby contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the desistance process.

## Literature Review

### Major Theories of Criminal Desistance

Research on desistance from crime can generally be categorized into two main perspectives. The first emphasizes internal factors such as human agency, identity transformation, and cognitive change. The second focuses on external influences, such as informal social controls—namely the impact of marriage and employment (Kazemian, 2012). Although each approach prioritizes different key factors, neither can completely exclude the influence of the other in the desistance process.

One prominent theory is Sampson and Laub's (1993) Age-Graded Theory of Informal Social Control, which posits that prosocial states such as marriage and employment can lead individuals to desist from crime gradually and almost unconsciously. In their later revised version (Sampson & Laub, 2003), they also incorporated the concept of "human agency" as an influential factor in the desistance process. However, their overall theory still maintains that external factors are the primary drivers in prompting individuals to desist from crime.

Another influential study comes from Giordano et al. (2002), who developed the Cognitive Transformation Theory based on Symbolic Interactionism. They argue that desistance is a process wherein individuals must first adopt an openness to change. Next, they must be exposed to various "hooks for change." Through experiencing conventional roles and interacting with others, individuals undergo identity and cognitive transformations that gradually lead to desistance. In their study, individual agency plays a role early in the process,

and they assert that cognitive transformation is triggered by “agentic moves.” Nevertheless, the core of their argument still emphasizes the role of social interaction in enabling identity and cognitive change that supports desistance.

Paternoster and Bushway (2009), based on rational choice theory, argue that individuals come to a point of desistance after multiple failures and accumulating dissatisfaction with life. They begin to construct a “feared self”—a vision of themselves they dread becoming, such as spending life in prison or losing loved ones. Recognizing this, the individual decides to change their identity and relies on human agency to become the person they aspire to be. This perspective is supported by a longitudinal study conducted by Liu and Bachman (2021), which spanned 20 years. Using survival analysis, they found that individuals with two to six prior offenses who developed a feared self were more likely to exert effort to distance themselves from crime.

## **Factors Influencing Criminal Desistance**

### ***Human Agency***

Human Agency is often mentioned in desistance research, but its definition remains unclear. Sampson and Laub (2003) describe it simply as “purposeful action,” while Giordano and colleagues offer no clear definition. In contrast, Paternoster and Bushway (2009) define human agency with four properties: intention, forethought, reflexivity, and power. While their model adds clarity, combining these properties into one factor may cause confusion. For example, if a person has intention and foresight but lacks reflexivity or power, do they truly have human agency—and is it enough to support desistance?

Accordingly, this study focuses on “intention,” a key part of human agency, defined here as a person’s active and conscious desire to stop offending. Though often described in different terms—such as motivation, decision, or proactive behavior—these ideas reflect the same core meaning. However, many studies still treat intention as a yes-or-no trait, which oversimplifies reality. Johnston et al. (2019) and Maruna (2001) are few researchers who consider it as a property that can vary in degree.

### ***Identity***

Identity is often linked to desistance. While Paternoster and Bushway (2009) argue that individuals seek a new, ideal self after painful failure, this new identity reshapes their behavior and social ties. Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph (2002) view identity change as a result of positive life events and new social roles. On the other hand, Maruna (2001) believes offenders already see themselves as good, using rationalizations to protect a prosocial self-image.

### ***Cognitive Transformation***

Cognitive transformation—specifically how individuals view crime—is a key to desistance. Paternoster and Bushway (2009) argue this change occurs early, as individuals realize the harms of crime and choose to change. Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph (2002) believe cognitive shifts happen later, after engaging in new relationships and roles. Sampson and Laub (1993, 2003) suggest cognitive change, if it occurs, likely happens gradually and later in the process.

### ***Informal Social Control***

Sampson and Laub see informal social control (e.g., work, partners) as a core factor throughout the desistance process. Giordano, Schroeder, et al. (2007) highlight the influence of supportive partners in identity, cognitive, and emotional change—most effective in the mid-stage. Paternoster and Bushway (2015) argue self-driven change is the most crucial factor, and informal controls are helpful but not essential.

Research also shows employment or marriage alone doesn't guarantee desistance (Black, 1976). Bushway and Reuter (1997) found jobs don't reduce crime if the person lacks desistance intention. Skardhamar and Savolainen (2012) found employment often follows desistance, not causes it. The impact of work depends on job type, involvement, and meaning to the individual (Weaver, 2015). Giordano, Cernkovich, and Holland (2003) also noted that without personal commitment, partner control has little effect. Thus, structural factors like jobs and relationships are potential turning points—but their effects vary by the individual's identity and readiness (Liu & Bachman, 2021).

### **Methodology**

A qualitative research method is adopted. Through detailed and comprehensive narratives provided by the research participants, the study seeks to capture the overall trajectory and nature of the desistance process. This study builds upon the 1999 research conducted by Hsu Chun-Chin and colleagues, which focused on juvenile offenders. A follow-up study was conducted in 2010 with the original participants. The present study targets those juvenile offenders from the 1999 study who had not engaged in any criminal behavior in the five years prior to the interviews. Among this group, a total of 10 individuals met the criteria; however, after being contacted by the researchers via mail and telephone, only two agreed to participate in this study. To increase the number and diversity of participants, two additional interviewees with similar age and background were recruited through purposive sampling. Thus, this study includes a total of four participants—two from the original 1999 study by Hsu et al., and two from the same cohort as the original participants.

Concerning data analysis, this study used a category-content approach from narrative research, interview transcripts were coded and revised. Based on four major factors—human agency, identity, cognitive transformation, and informal social control—the data were re-analyzed to identify core themes. The researcher repeatedly reviewed transcripts to refine categories and capture overlooked or emerging insights. Peer review was also conducted, with feedback used to refine themes. Findings are supported by direct quotes from participants to enhance credibility.

### **Findings**

The life stories of four participants:

#### **DA: Returning to the Right Path After a Brush With Death**

DA began engaging in deviant behavior in junior high school. To avoid being bullied, he chose to become a “bad student” and started associating with delinquent peers. Before the age of 18, DA had been arrested by the police four times. The first three arrests were due to

stealing motorcycle parts, driven by curiosity or the desire to modify his own or his friends' motorcycles.

At the time, DA didn't take these actions seriously. Even after being arrested, he remained indifferent due to being released on bail without serious consequences. That changed one day when a friend suggested stealing from a betel nut stall. They were caught in the act, and this time, the judge refused to give DA another chance—he was sent to a juvenile detention center. This experience marked a turning point, prompting DA to reflect on his life and ask himself, "How did I end up like this?" He began to feel shame about his incarceration. After being released, DA resolved to turn his life around and cut ties with his negative peer group.

Since then, DA has not been arrested for any criminal activity. However, the true turning point came when he was 19. While out driving with a friend at night, they saw a police checkpoint. As a prank, the friend performed a drift maneuver in front of the police but accidentally crashed into a parked truck. Panicked, the friend fled the scene. Mistaking them for serious offenders, the police opened fire during the chase. DA was struck multiple times. Though he survived, he had to undergo surgery to remove his spleen and part of his liver. Lying in the emergency room, DA saw the worry and heartbreak on his family's faces. It was in that moment that he truly realized the recklessness and unfilial nature of his past.

After this incident, DA began to live a stable and lawful life. He started to work as an apprentice in a motorcycle shop. Meanwhile, he met a woman and they eventually married. DA started his own motorcycle repair business, a job he has held ever since. His business has become well-established; he often collaborates with the police to repair their motorcycles. Today, he owns three properties, lives with his parents, enjoys a harmonious marriage, and has two children. Concerned about his son potentially going down the wrong path, he even enrolled him in a private boarding school for stricter supervision, showing great dedication to his children's upbringing.

Looking back on his youth, DA admits that he was impulsive and thoughtless. He attributes much of his criminal behavior to the influence of delinquent peers. The Brush with death made him realized the cost of crime and delinquency, and further helped him generate great desistence intention which later leads him to a normal and decent life with happy family and stable work.

### **DB: Drifting Between Lawfulness and Delinquency**

DB's parents divorced when he was little, and his father was authoritarian and often resorted to corporal punishment for discipline. In junior high school, DB lacked interest in academics and developed a strong passion for billiards. After class each day, he would head to the pool hall, where he met many deviant peers and began smoking and driving without a license.

At the age of 13, in order to join his friends on a motorcycle outing, DB stole a motorcycle and was arrested by the police. As it was his first offense, he was not sent to a correctional institution but was instead placed under protective supervision. The experience served as a warning, but it was not enough to completely steer him away from crime.

During summer vacation in junior high, DB began working part-time at a classmate's father's acrylic factory. After graduating, he initially intended to enroll in a vocational high school's auto repair program, but after failing the entrance exam, he decided to enter the workforce

instead. Working later became a turning point for him. With the money he made by his own hands, he bought himself a motorcycle, which let him realize that working is a better way to get what he wants. Since then, work has become his important social control. However, when the factory was shut down, DB was forced to change jobs. Given his love for billiards, he chose to work at a pool hall—a job he held for over a decade. At one point, DB even considered becoming a professional pool player, but he never quite broke through in the professional scene.

Even after entering the workforce, DB continued to commit a few criminal behaviors, like gambling at a night market, assaults following a drunken argument at a karaoke bar, using ecstasy at dance clubs. Luckily, those offences were not formally recorded. Additionally, due to his commitment to work, those incidents were all one-off-event.

At age 28, he met a woman who later became his wife. Getting married was the second turning point for him. DB left the pool hall to become a ventilation system technician for a more stable lifestyle. He and his wife had two daughters. Although their relationship was mostly without conflict, his work required frequent travel, which strained the marriage. At age 39, his wife filed for divorce. Afterward, DB moved in with his father and two daughters. DB devotes himself fully to his children, taking them on outings during weekends and seldom playing billiards anymore. He stated that he would not raise his daughters the way his father raised him, and instead aims to foster open communication with them.

DB's youthful deviance gradually faded as he entered the workforce and marriage. Looking back, he views his teenage theft of a motorcycle as a result of ignorance and lack of legal awareness. That experience helped DB generate a moderate level of desistance intention. While he never committed theft again, his recreational lifestyle still led to gambling, assault, and drug-using. Nevertheless, the continuing interaction with the important others through work and marriage, DB accumulates more and more informal social control in his life. Now, as a single father, DB has shifted his entire focus to his children. His daily life revolves around work and family, and he rarely visits pool halls. Overall, DB has become a relatively stable member of society.

### **DC: Reborn for Her Daughter**

DC's deviant behavior began in junior high school. By the second semester of her first year in junior high, she had almost completely dropped out of school. Around the same time, her older brother left for college in northern Taiwan, and the absence of his companionship pushed DC toward a different path as she began spending time with neighborhood peers her age.

One of those neighbors used drugs and took DC to meet a drug dealer in exchange for free drugs. Naive and unaware, DC used methamphetamine for the first time under pressure, which marked the beginning of her drug use. Her circle of friends quickly became entirely composed of fellow drug users, one of whom eventually became her husband. They met through drug use and legally married when DC became pregnant at the age of 17.

After her daughter was born, DC stopped using drugs. However, her husband became abusive, and just three months into the marriage, she returned to her parents' home with her daughter and later filed for divorce. For the sake of her daughter, DC returned to a normal life, quit drugs, and completed her junior high education. However, after being scammed out of

NT\$600,000, she had a serious conflict with her family, which led her to leave home in anger and fall back into drug use. In exchange for free drugs, she agreed to transport them, not fully understanding the severity of the consequences. She was later convicted of drug trafficking and received a heavy sentence—her first incarceration in a correctional institution (she had previously been arrested twice for drug use but was not detained).

DC spent eight long years in prison, missing her daughter's growth and the chance to say goodbye to her beloved father, who passed away during her sentence. His death hit her hard, as he had always been the one who loved her most. It made her realize that family is the most important thing in life. Because of her good behavior, she was granted parole. Before her release, she made a firm decision never to reoffend and began thinking about how to regain her family's trust—especially from her daughter, who had never visited her in prison and even refused to read her letters.

Motivated by this resolve, DC found a job just three days after her release and has held onto it ever since. She works in a food processing factory, a job that brings her a sense of purpose and happiness. She cut off all ties with her former drug-using friends and now lives a simple and disciplined life. Her transformation became evident to her family, and her daughter gradually began to accept her again. Today, DC lives with her mother and daughter. When asked to rate her satisfaction at different stages of life, DC gave her current life a 9 out of 10—saying this is the most satisfying time in her entire life.

Reflecting on the past, DC expressed deep hatred for drugs, believing they ruined her life. She deeply regrets missing the chance to say goodbye to her father during her incarceration. At the same time, she is profoundly grateful to her mother and brother, who took care of her daughter while she was in prison. These two factors helped her truly understand the cost of crime and the importance of family. These two factors helped DC generate a strong desistance intention, which further leads to an active and concrete plan for having a normal life and a powerful human agency to refuse any seduction of drugs.

### **DD: Entangled in Love and Resentment With Family**

DD is the eldest son in a family with one sister and two younger brothers. Growing up, his father was an alcoholic who often became violent after drinking, physically abusing both his wife and children. As a result, DD remembers that the family avoided spending time in the living room whenever their father was home. DD was especially close to his mother and sister, but less so with his younger brothers due to a significant age gap.

Around the age of 21 or 22, while he was serving in the military, a traumatic incident occurred at home: his father, drunk and in conflict with his mother, stabbed DD's sister with a steak knife when she tried to intervene. She lost a kidney as a result, and their father was sentenced to prison. It was around this time that DD began using drugs. To support his drug addiction, DD started stealing and selling motorcycles. Although he was arrested for several times, his two prison sentences were short—less than six months each—and did not lead to meaningful rehabilitation. At the age of 29, DD's sister was physically abused by her boyfriend. Enraged and under the influence of drugs, DD created a homemade explosive and placed it in the boyfriend's car. The blast severely injured the boyfriend's father—resulting in the loss of his hand—and also wounded two police officers. DD was sentenced to life imprisonment for the crime.

Two years into his sentence, DD's father passed away. The fact that he couldn't say goodbye left him with a deep sense of regret. In the years that followed, his mother battled cancer, relapsed, and eventually passed away before DD could be granted parole. Her death was a devastating blow, and at that point, he even lost much of his will to live. Missing parents' funerals made DD deeply reflect on his life, and hence realized how great the cost of crime is. That recognition also came along with the strong desistance intention. He quit smoking, drugs, alcohol, and gambling entirely while in prison. After being granted parole, DD devoted himself to work. By staying away from any deviant behaviors and holding a good job, he wants to let his family and late mother proud of him.

Reflecting on his past, DD expresses deep remorse. He believes his life went off track the moment he took his first hit of methamphetamine. The bombing incident, in particular, cost him many valuable years behind bars. Now, DD lives with his two brothers and has cut ties with all negative influences and habits. In his free time, he enjoys exploring good food with his girlfriend. DD describes his current life as simple yet beautiful—free and fulfilling. If he had the chance to start over, he says he would choose to live this kind of life from the very beginning.

## **Conclusion**

### **Negative Life Events Foster Crime Desistance Intention and Cognitive Transformation**

When individuals experience negative life events that are directly or indirectly related to their criminal behavior, these adverse outcomes may become associated with their offenses, transforming into perceived “costs of crime.” The greater these costs, the more likely individuals are to develop a desire to desist from crime in order to avoid experiencing such consequences again. As Paternoster and Bushway (2009) suggest, the cost of crime can accumulate over time throughout the criminal trajectory, eventually leading to a “crystallization of discontent” that compels individuals to cease offending.

However, in some cases, a single significant negative life event can serve as a wake-up call, abruptly confronting the individual with the harsh realities and consequences of their criminal actions. This can shatter the illusion or perceived rewards associated with crime and lead to a powerful and immediate intention to desist—what may be described as determination.

Moreover, the costs of crime can reshape an individual's cognitive evaluation of criminal behavior and the lifestyle that facilitates it. Behaviors once perceived as beneficial or worthwhile may be reinterpreted as harmful or unsustainable. In essence, when negative life events become symbolically or emotionally connected to the consequences of crime, they can not only foster the desire to desist but also alter the individual's cognitive framework—no longer viewing crime as a “profitable” choice.

In summary, when adverse life events are internalized as the costs of crime, they may both ignite the motivation to desist and shift the individual's perception of crime and deviance. The greater the perceived cost, the stronger the desistance intention tends to be. Meanwhile, the intention comes along with a clearer recognition of the harm brought by criminal actions.



## **Desistance Intention as a Key Factor**

The intention to desist is a key factor in ending criminal behavior—it acts as the starting point of the desistance process. Without it, crime rarely disappears from an individual's life. While many offenders have thoughts of stopping, the strength of that intention varies, and this difference is crucial to whether they succeed.

When the intention is strong, individuals take proactive and concrete steps toward desistance, increasing their chances of success. In contrast, when intention is weak, motivation is low, strategies are vague, and reliance on external influences grows—making the process less stable and success less likely. If there is no intention at all, desistance depends entirely on external factors, and internal tendencies may even resist positive changes, making desistance highly uncertain and unlikely.

## **Varying Levels of Desistance Intention Shape Different Desistance Pathways**

The development of desistance intention initiates the process of ending criminal behavior. Different levels of intention lead individuals to adopt different paths toward desistance, resulting in diverse desistance trajectories. Key factors such as cognitive shifts, identity change, and informal social control are also influenced by the strength of intention, playing different roles at different stages to help stabilize the desistance process.

### ***Desistance Process of Those With Strong Intentions***

A strong intention to desist drives individuals to distance themselves from crime-related people, situations, and environments, and to actively engage in prosocial lifestyles. They overcome obstacles with determination to achieve their goal. This type of desister shows strong willpower, and due to a cognitive shift about crime, often stops offending abruptly—what can be seen as a “cliff-like” desistance. Although they later enter new environments, gain new identities, and build more prosocial beliefs and sources of control, these changes occur after desistance and are not the cause of it.

### ***Desistance Process of Those With Moderate Intentions***

Individuals with a moderate level of desistance intention are more influenced by external factors. They do not actively seek crime but also do not avoid risky situations. As Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph (2002) note, they often begin with an open attitude toward life and gradually enter prosocial environments, where they experience positive life events that offer new identities and sources of control. Over time, they stop offending “by default.” Their desistance is shaped by external contexts and gradual changes in self-identity and cognition, which in turn influence their choices and behavior. Because many factors are involved, this process often follows a zigzag pattern—crime does not stop immediately but decreases over time until it eventually ends.

### ***Desistance Process of Those With Low Intentions***

Individuals with low desistance intention are less likely to stop offending. They tend to maintain their original lifestyles and may even actively seek out crime or risky environments. Although they might encounter positive life events—such as marriage or employment—the lack of intention makes it difficult for them to invest in new roles or sustain a prosocial

lifestyle. As a result, these turning points often fail to lead to true desistance. Even so, desistance may eventually occur, often aligning with Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) view that aging reduces criminal opportunities. However, this path is typically slow and unpredictable.

## References

- Black, D. (1976). *The behavior of law*. Academic Press.
- Bushway, S. D., & Reuter, P. (1997). Labor markets and crime risk factors. In L. W. Sherman, D. P. Farrington, B. C. Welsh, & D. L. MacKenzie (Eds.), *Preventing Crime: What Works, What Doesn't, What's Promising* (pp. 6.1–6.27). U.S. Department of Justice.
- Giordano, P. C., Cernkovich, S. A., & Holland, D. D. (2003). Changes in friendship relations over the life course: Implications for desistance from crime. *Criminology*, 41(2), 293–327.
- Giordano, P. C., Cernkovich, S. A., & Rudolph, J. L. (2002). Gender, crime, and desistance: Toward a theory of cognitive transformation. *American Journal of Sociology*, 107(4), 990–1064.
- Giordano, P. C., Schroeder, R. D., & Cernkovich, S. A. (2007). Emotions and crime over the life course: A neo-Meadian perspective on criminal continuity and change. *American Journal of Sociology*, 112(6), 1603–1661.
- Gottfredson, M. R., & Hirschi, T. (1990). *A general theory of crime*. Stanford University Press.
- Johnston, L., Hughes, G., & Walters, R. (2019). *Critical criminology*. Routledge.
- Kazemian, L. (2012). Desistance from crime and the role of life-course opportunities: The case of second chances. *New Directions for Youth Development*, 2012(134), 127–146.
- Liu, L., & Bachman, R. (2021). Self-identity and persistent offending: A quantitative test of identity theory of desistance. *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation*, 60(5), 341–357.
- Maruna, S. (2001). *Making good: How ex-convicts reform and rebuild their lives*. American Psychological Association.
- Paternoster, R., & Bushway, S. D. (2009). Desistance and the “feared self”: Toward an identity theory of criminal desistance. *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology*, 99(4), 1103–1156.
- Paternoster, R., Bachman, R., Kerrison, E., O’Connell, D., & Smith, L. (2015). Human agency and explanations of criminal desistance: A case study of North Carolina prisoners. *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice*, 31(4), 426–444.
- Sampson, R. J., & Laub, J. H. (1993). *Crime in the making: Pathways and turning points through life*. Harvard University Press.
- Sampson, R. J., & Laub, J. H. (2003). *Shared beginnings, divergent lives: Delinquent boys to age 70*. Harvard University Press.
- Shue, C. J., Ma, C. C., & Chen, Y. S. (1999). *The study on early prediction of juvenile delinquency*. Youth Development Council, Executive Yuan.

Skardhamar, T., & Savolainen, J. (2012). Does employment contribute to desistance? Offending trajectories of a Norwegian prison cohort. *Journal of Quantitative Criminology*, 28(3), 329–346.

Weaver, B. (2015). *Offending and desistance: The importance of social relations*. Routledge.

Wolfgang, M., Figlio, R., & Sellin, T. (1972). *Delinquency in a birth cohort*. University of Chicago Press.