# ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: A NEW ERA OF REENTRY: ADDRESSING THE APPLICATION OF IDENTITY THEORIES OF DESISTANCE TO REENTRY PROGRAMS FOR INDIVIDUALS EXPERIENCING EMERGING ADULTHOOD

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The United States has long dealt with the adverse consequences of prison overcrowding (Haney 2006; Levitt 1996). The emergence of research investigating these deleterious effects works to strengthen the consensus that something needs to change. Along with this research, public opinion on how we treat formerly justice-involved individuals and those in jails/prisons are changing as well. Indeed, a recent poll conducted by the American Civil Liberties Union found that around 90% of Americans support criminal justice reform concerning prison overcrowding (*American Civil Liberties Union* n.d.). One way to address this issue is to equip people for successful reentry. However, a question arises. How do we best prepare these individuals for returning to the community? Unfortunately, there is yet to be a truly effective program/framework to help deal with the complex effects of prisoner reentry. Specifically, despite increased efforts to deal with high recidivism rates in the United States things have stayed relatively the same. One of the most promising frameworks,

Risk-Needs Responsivity (RNR) has provided the community with some positive outcomes. However, recidivism rates showcase that, overall, RNR and other similar programs/frameworks still have yet to make a significant impact. A conceptual backdrop few programs have considered implementing are identity theories of desistance – which may help to cultivate a long-term decrease in overall offending. Furthermore, little attention has been paid to a critical population in the context of desistance and reentry - emerging adults, or those between the ages of 18-25. The current study attempts to apply identity theories of desistance towards reentry practices specifically in the population of emerging adulthood by utilizing the Pathways to Desistance data. In conducting this proposed analysis, the study will begin to break down the relationship between these interrelated concepts to postulate theoretical and practical foundations better geared towards reducing recidivism and criminal offending moving forward.

A NEW ERA OF REENTRY: ADDRESSING THE APPLICATION OF IDENTITY THEORIES OF DESISTANCE TO REENTRY PROGRAMS FOR INDIVIDUALS EXPERIENCING EMERGING ADULTHOOD

By

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# Chapter 1: Introduction

As of 2020, there were roughly 1.8 million people in the United States incarceration system (Kang-Brown, Montagnet, and Heiss 2021). According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS), on average, around 590,400 inmates are released from state and federal prisons every year (James 2015). This number will likely grow as the United States government attempts to mitigate the numerous negative effects of prison overcrowding. In general, prison overcrowding has caused a considerable amount of strain on the justice system and surrounding communities. The reality faced by the criminal justice system is that most, if not all, of those in jails and prisons will eventually return to the community after their incarceration (Travis 2005). A return to the community poses several challenges for previous offenders and their community members. A study conducted by researchers at the BJS found that in 2005, 83% of state prisoners in 30 states were rearrested over 9 years of their release - 44% being rearrested within 1 year of release (Alper, Durose, and Markman 2018). Ultimately, one of the greatest challenges the criminal justice system faces today is reducing recidivism once ex-offenders are released from incarceration.

Matters of reentry present a problem both economically and socially. Wagner and Rabuy (2017) calculate that the total cost of incarceration for the government and families involved reaches upwards of 182 billion dollars annually. Still, this estimate does not capture the millions of dollars in untold lost revenues generated through a lack of participation in the economy for those who are currently incarcerated. Additionally, there are several social consequences associated with imprisonment and future crime. For

example, attention has been drawn to the finding that the incarceration of fathers positively affects the development of anti-social behaviors that lead to delinquency and criminal behavior in their children (Rakt, Murray, and Nieuwbeerta 2012; Wildeman 2010). Furthermore, incarceration leads to numerous collateral consequences. Collateral consequences refer to a process whereby offenders are negatively impacted by the unintended effects of their imprisonment and/or criminal behavior. This includes negative life events such as loss of employment and the inability to access higher education. Ultimately, collateral consequences keep many offenders and their families trapped in the criminal justice system without a way to break free from their past (Chesney-Lind and Mauer 2003; Hagan and Dinovitzer 1999; Turanovic, Rodriguez, and Pratt 2012). Additionally, continuous exposure to re-arrest leads to accumulated and more persistent effects of collateral consequences – making it extremely difficult to exit from the cycle of imprisonment. Early research investigating the cycle of incarceration found mixed results in regard to the effectiveness of programs to deal with this larger issue – some even suggesting it is completely ineffective (Martinson 1974).

Despite some early setbacks in the realm of reentry research and policy caused by studies like the infamous Martinson (1974) report, a growing line of thought began to develop that challenged the assumption of ineffective reentry/rehabilitative programs in the United States incarceration system. Work such as Petersilia (1999) emphasized the need for prison reform so that both the offender and the community were better poised for safety and success in reintegration. Nonetheless, after years of research and much disagreement among scholars, the United States incarceration system still has produced high rates of recidivism post-release. Current approaches taken by scholars seem to have

no effect in lessening recidivism rates of individual offenders. Indeed, the BJS examined recidivism of prisoners in 34 different states from 2012-2017 and found that after 5 years post-release 71% of ex-offenders were re-arrested – a number extremely similar to reentry rates in the past (Durose 2021).

One shortcoming of most reentry programs/research is that they tend to disregard the offender in terms of life course trajectories and desistance pathways, particularly concerning cognitive transformation and identity. Work conducted by scholars such as Maruna (2001) and Giordano et al. (2002) explores the importance of viewing desistance theories in terms of changes in prosocial identity. They theorize that these internal developments are critical steppingstones in order for structural changes associated with general life course theories to take place in a criminal trajectory. Identity theories of desistance are focused on how individual perceptions are instrumental in fostering a future decrease in criminal offending. The application of identity theory to recidivism could promulgate opportunities leading to decreasing rates of recidivism and future offending.

Furthermore, emerging adulthood, or those roughly between the ages of 18-25, is an especially salient age group to analyze in terms of theories of desistance, identity, and cognitive transformation (Arnett 2000). Arnett (2000) argues for the categorizing of emerging adulthood by explaining:

> Emerging adulthood is a time of life when many different directions remain possible, when little about the future has been decided for certain, when the scope of independent exploration of life's possibilities is greater for most people than it will be at any other period of the life course. (p. 469)

Indeed, reentry, incarceration, and perceived identity in this context become an especially vulnerable time for these individuals. These life events may have unintended future

consequences in the offender's life – making it more difficult to drop their criminal identity and/or enact cognitive change. For example, Liberman, Kirk, and Kim (2014) found that recidivism, measured by rearrest, among a group of youths in the Chicago area increased the chances of future arrest and future offending. Additionally, the percentage of repeat offenders in emerging adulthood is very similar to general rates of recidivism. Some studies showcase even higher percentages of recidivism among emerging adults compared with the general population (Denney and Connor 2016; Thomas, Hurley, and Grimes 2002; Trulson et al. 2005). These factors exhibit the importance of examining this at-risk population in the context of cognitive/identity theories of desistance and reentry practices.

Determining partial mechanisms of cognitive/identity processes for emerging adults in prison could be a crucial step in reforming how we might better approach rehabilitative techniques. Specifically, programs utilizing these theories might be better suited to helping reduce rates of recidivism and offending for those in emerging adulthood. Some additional research has emphasized the advantages of general cognitive behavior treatments during incarceration (Landenberger and Lipsey 2005; Lipsey, Landenberger, and Wilson 2007). By examining specific principles of identity/cognitive transformation this article will (1) help to explore several key themes in identity theories of desistance and (2) add to the burgeoning research regarding attempts to utilize these theories to take a new approach to reentry practices in the United States. These efforts will lend themselves to the ultimate goal of helping reduce rates of future recidivism and future offending, especially within the population of emerging adulthood. In order to connect these key themes, it is first crucial to explore the processes of reentry in the

United States today, especially as they relate to cognitive/identity theories of desistance and emerging adulthood.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

*Reentry Into the Community: A Brief Historical Overview*

The history of reentry programs is relatively recent in the timeframe of criminological theory. Indeed, it was not until the middle of the 1900s that the United States incarceration system began to truly acknowledge the process of reentry as a relevant step in the cycle of incarceration (Clear, Reisig, and Cole 2018; Seiter and Kadela 2003). Furthermore, the formulation of serious inquiry with respect to reentry practices did not take shape until the early 2000s (Seiter and Kadela 2003). Reentry programs were heavily influenced by the general attitudes of the time. The "tough on crime" era between the 1980s-1990s produced a high rate of incarceration as policies were focused more on putting offenders behind bars rather than preparing them for entering back into the community (Hallett 2012; Visher 2007). Whereas, in the early 2000s, literature began to be produced that took a more positivist approach to the idea of prison incarceration and reentry (Immerwahr and Johnson 2002). This context is critical to understanding the lens through which we view reentry today.

*Definitions*

There is a general lack of consensus among scholars on how exactly to define the practice of "reentry" (Pettus et al. 2021). Some scholars have adopted a broad approach to reentry. They suggest that this term should encompass a more general movement that highlights the idea that reentry is an inevitable process tied to incarceration (Travis 2007;

Travis and Visher 2005). For example, Petersilia (2003 p. 3) claims that reentry

constitutes "all activities and programming conducted to prepare ex-convicts to return

safely to the community and to live as law-abiding citizens." However, some scholars

have taken to a more definitive approach to reentry. For example, Seiter and Kadela

(2003 p. 368) define reentry programs as:

> 1. correctional programs (United States and Canada) that focus on the transition from
> prison to community (prerelease, work release, halfway houses, or specific reentry
> programs) and 2. programs that have initiated treatment (substance abuse, life skills,
> education, cognitive/behavioral, sex/violent offender) in a prison setting and have linked
> with a community program to provide continuity of care.

Both approaches carry validity but have their problems (Petersilia 2004). Specifically,

current broad approaches to defining reentry are helpful but do not provide suitable

contexts for researchers to completely quantify its measures. Meanwhile, specific

definitions, like Seiter and Kadela's (2003), help to address this issue but are too narrow

to consider transitional and other programs thought to aid in the reentry process (Apel

2011; Bloom et al. 2009; Petersilia 2004). These issues make it extremely difficult to

corroborate and distinguish successful reentry programs. Moving forward, for the

purposes of this study, the concept of reentry should be understood as more of a broad

generalization first discussed in this section. Overall, despite the difficulties of combining

definitions, there have been some attempts to unpack what programs work best and why.

*A Summary of What We Know*

Attempting to characterize the field of reentry is incredibly complex. What we do

know is that for the most part, a majority of reentry-service programs do not account for a

large amount of reduction in recidivism (Ndrecka 2014). A major shortcoming often

mentioned in reentry literature is that current practices do not adequately address the

collateral consequences of imprisonment and its associated barriers to reentry (Pinard 2006; 2010; Pinard and Thompson 2005). Additionally, many scholars have underscored the failure of reentry programs to address the myriad of legal issues associated with reentry practices (Berger and DeGrossa 2013; Pinard 2010). Furthermore, there have been few attempts to compile large amounts of data to determine what is most useful and what makes a program most successful at reducing recidivism after reentry.

To date, there have only been two major meta-analyses of reentry programs in the United States that attempt to measure what is most effective. The first, conducted by Seiter and Kadela (2003), found that programs built on targeting drug rehabilitation, offering vocational/work training programs, utilizing halfway houses, and programs in prison were generally most effective at reducing recidivism. The second meta-analysis utilized Seiter and Kadela's (2003) definition of reentry to evaluate 53 previous studies investigating reentry programs (Ndrecka 2014). Ndrecka (2014) found that there was significant variety in recidivism rates throughout the reentry programs examined. In an attempt to measure the most successful characteristics it was noted that programs focusing on reentry while in prison institutions, during the transitional period back into the community, and after they return to the community were most promising (Ndrecka 2014). This three-pronged approach to reentry programs is a common finding of what is most effective for reintegrating offenders and reducing recidivism (Ndrecka 2014; Ndrecka, Listwan, and Latessa 2017; Taxman, Young, and Byrne 2002). These empirical findings provide researchers with a base-level understanding of the complex nature of reentry. However, they also showcase how individual frameworks and programs vary widely depending on factors such as structure, implementation, and management.

Although many programs may vary in scope and structure, the most dominant framework involved in reentry programming today is the risk-needs responsivity model.

*Risk-Needs Responsivity*

The most popular evaluation framework used to determine the correct services for prisoners facing reentry is the risk-needs responsivity approach (RNR). The RNR assessment method was first developed out of a movement to reimagine the common conception back in the mid to late 1970s that reducing recidivism through rehabilitation was ineffective (Martinson 1974). Soon afterward, scholars Andrews and Bonta developed what was known as the Psychology of Criminal Conduct. It is a general theory broadly focusing on human behavior and deviancy (Ogloff and Davis 2004). Out of this approach came risk-needs responsivity which is focused on 3 main concepts – *risk*, *needs*, and *responsivity*. The *risk* principle entails the importance of evaluating, predicting, and matching offenders to assert a label so they can be directed towards more or less intensive treatments (Andrews and Bonta 2003; Imm et al. 2020; Ogloff and Davis 2004; Simourd and Hoge 2000). The *needs* principle focuses on the criminogenic traits of an individual and the ability of a program to reduce these needs so that the dynamic risk factors are diminished (Andrews and Bonta 2003). Finally, the *responsivity* principle aligns *needs* and *risk* with actual programs in order to facilitate the most effective treatments for offenders (Andrews and Bonta 2003).

In addition to these 3 principles, Bonta and Andrews (2017) later extended their model to encapsulate 8 major criminogenic factors related to the *need* principle of their risk-assessment tool. These factors include past criminal history, evidence of antisocial personality traits (such as impulsivity, disregard for others, etc.), substance abuse, lack of

non-criminal leisurely activities, poor relationships with family, associations with other individuals engaged in criminal activity, poor performances in school or work, and pro-criminal attitudes/identities (Bonta and Andrews 2017). The purpose of developing these major components was to better categorize and assess factors that are directly linked to criminal behaviors. Additionally, the criminogenic traits identified were hypothesized to be most susceptible to intervention and treatment techniques currently utilized by RNR programs.

Research designed to study the effectiveness of the RNR model showcase a variety of results. Dowden and Andrews (2000) performed one of the earliest meta-analyses by studying programs utilizing the key RNR principles. They performed an analytic review of another meta-analysis focused on general rehabilitative treatment and coded for several variables designed to evaluate program effectiveness including risk, need, and general responsivity (Dowden 1998; Dowden and Andrews 2000). After comparing these variables with rates of reoffending, they found that programs utilizing these principles showcased, on average, greater reductions in violent reoffending. Additionally, Dowden et al. (2003 p. 524) investigated the RNR model concerning relapse treatment and noted that "The principles of need and general responsivity made significant contributions to program effectiveness within this set of studies." Furthermore, they identified criminogenic factors as being the most important indicator of whether or not relapse treatment was successful. More recently, Smith et al. (2009) performed an updated meta-analysis of primary research directed towards the RNR model and found that, overall, the responsivity principle had the most distinctive effect on the reduction of recidivism in reentry programs based on prior research.

However, despite some initial promising findings, there are several concerns with the risk-needs responsivity approach. Firstly, Pettus et al. (2021) noted that overall, the RNR approach has failed to significantly impact rates of recidivism in the community. They found that "…the mean effect size (r) for RNR Model–adherent correctional treatment programs conducted outside of the laboratory setting is only 0.15 (k = 10), suggesting that something integral to success is missing" (Pettus et al. 2021 p. 427). Another major concern of the RNR model is that it is too focused on criminogenic needs (Basanta, Fariña, and Arce 2018; Brogan et al. 2015; Ward, Melser, and Yates 2007). Specifically, the RNR approach fails to consider the positive effects of helping to resolve non-criminogenic factors (such as self-esteem, anxiety, etc.). Researchers have found that addressing non-criminogenic factors is an indicator of preventing recidivism during rehabilitation (Basanta et al. 2018; Maruna 2001). Furthermore, a major concern is that the lack of reduction in recidivism especially concerning RNR programs is a result of the disconnect between theory and practice – suggesting critical implementation issues for vulnerable populations of inmates in the incarceration system (Brogan et al. 2015).

More recently, scholars have begun to address the failure of RNR to appropriately incorporate offenders' cognition and criminal identity (Pettus et al. 2021; Ward et al. 2007). This disconnect is especially salient as it related to theories of crime over the life course. Although more recent literature produced by founders Bonta and Andrews (2017) move to including these important theoretical considerations, RNR is so focused on the principles of risk, needs, and assessment that they take a mere backdrop in their framework. Additionally, Serin and Lloyd (2017) highlight the fact that there are key differences in the underlying mechanisms of RNR and general desistance. Mainly, like

other critics, they argue RNR focuses more on addressing primary criminogenic characteristics while desistance literature tends to concentrate more on changes in cognitive transformation and life events over the life course (Serin and Lloyd 2017). Though many scholars have argued for an amalgamation of desistance theory and RNR modeling there has yet to be a concerted effort to effectively unify these two concepts together in real-world applications.

*General Theories of Desistance: Origins & Definitions*

Similar to reentry, the criminological community has long struggled with the establishment of an overarching definition of desistance (Bersani and Doherty 2018). One theme that remains consistent across studies is the idea that desistance is a process (Bersani and Doherty 2018; Bushway et al. 2001; Laub and Sampson 2001). Whereas the process of desistance is understood to be a continuous phenomenon – one that does not suddenly stop at a point in someone's life. A large discrepancy that appears in much of the current literature's definitions is whether or not desistance refers to a complete cessation of criminal activity over an individual's life. For example, Bushway et al. (2001 p. 500) define desistance as "the process of reduction in the rate of offending…" In contrast, McNeill et al. (2012 p. 3) define desistance as "the long-term abstinence from criminal behavior among those for whom offending had become a pattern of behavior…" The varying, and often vague, definitions make it difficult to accurately test the empirical validity of many programs built upon desistance theories. However, there are some foundational theories related to desistance that have been empirically reinforced.

One of the most influential theories of desistance originates from Sampson and Laub's (1993) theory of age-graded social control. They were one of the first to apply a

life course perspective to theories of criminal offending (Laub and Sampson 2001; Sampson and Laub 1993). Their age-grade theory provides the backbone for many theories we see today. Crime over the life course is the idea that offending may vary with age and social context (Laub and Sampson 2001). An important concept in age-grade theory is the idea of "turning points" (Laub and Sampson 2001; Sampson and Laub 1993). A turning point in the desistance process generally refers to a life-changing event that shifts an individual's trajectory and results in a reduction in criminal activity. Of the many different factors that may influence a turning point over the life course, Laub and Sampson (2001) found that stable employment and good marriages were some of the most significant indicators of general criminal desistance. Indeed, the negative correlation between stable marriages and/or employment and criminal activity has been corroborated through several subsequent studies (Laub, Rowan, and Sampson 2019). This idea is what many commonly refer to today as a structural desistance theory (Bersani and Doherty 2018). In contrast, roughly a decade later, emerging theories begin to explore the prioritization of the individual in the desistance process rather than structural factors.

*Identity and Cognitive Transformation: An Extension of Life Course Desistance Theory*

One of the first scholars to diverge from traditional structural explanations of the desistance process was Maruna (2001). Maruna (2001) spent considerable time evaluating life-course narratives by performing a qualitative study of previous offenders in Liverpool, England. The result of his evaluation led to the concept of 'redemption scripts', or the idea that those who are actively desisting from crime often conceptualize their previous experiences in a way that allows them to differentiate between a criminal past and a non-criminal identity. As a result, ex-offenders are able to rebuild their past,

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current, and future perceptions of themselves which, according to Maruna (2001), allow for important distortions in future motivations for continued desistance. Another characteristic of those who would desist was their strong belief in their ability to move away from crime – indicating a strong sense of locus of control. In contrast, those who continued to commit crimes typically saw themselves as having less control over their own lives and did not undergo such narratives as to encourage them to move away from crime.

Another important extension of cognitive/identity theory as it relates to criminal desistance is Giordano et al. (2002). Giordano et al. (2002) take special care to build off of Sampson and Laub's (1993; 2001) previous work on desistance theory. Specifically, Giordano et al. (2002 p. 991) point out that "A potential limitation of this important body of work is that the sample on which the analyses were based was composed entirely of white male offenders who matured into adulthood during the 1950s." As a result, they take a more social-psychological approach to theories of desistance by postulating the effects of cognitive transformation within individuals as a main motivating factor in the desistance process. This approach is also intended to broaden the theoretical purview by addressing a more diverse background of individuals. Giordano et al. (2002) utilize a thorough qualitative review of a mix of life-course narratives involving male and female ex-offenders. In essence, they found few differences between the desistance pathways of males and females. This led them to conclude that while there may be structural patterns important to fostering desistance (as explained in Sampson and Laub's work), the emphasis should be placed on individuals' internal motivations in selecting these specific avenues or "hooks" for change. Indeed, the shifting of cognitive direction allows for a

change in identity that ultimately influences the decision-making processes of criminality. This important divergence from the age-graded theory of social control and general structural desistance provides the underpinning for desistance theories geared more towards investigations of cognitive transformation/identity that lead to a long-term decrease in the overall pattern of offending for individuals.

Similarly, Paternoster and Bushway (2009) build on Giordano's cognitive-emotional theory with more of a direct focus on identity concerning social psychology. They state that "Desistance, when it occurs, generally involves a deliberate act of self-change—a 'break in the past'" (p. 1107). Such work is heavily inspired by theories of identity and symbolic interactionism developed in the field of social psychology by Mead (1934). According to Paternoster and Bushway (2009), for the process of desistance to occur, one must transition from the old identity to the new. Indeed, many scholars have vocalized the importance of helping to change one's identity, especially as an agent for promoting positive behaviors in adolescents (McLean and Syed 2015; McMurray et al. 2011). Part of the process involved in many theories is the idea that the offender must be willing to engage in desistance through a change in the way they think (Giordano et al. 2002; King 2013; Paternoster and Bushway 2009). Ultimately, an identity theory of desistance stresses the importance of an individual's cognitive process in interactions with outside phenomena that work towards the structural changes emphasized by earlier desistance theorists – allowing for a more complete picture of the complicated matrix of experiences related to repeated and fluctuating development. Currently, unlike structural theories of desistance, there have not been many attempts to empirically measure this type of desistance theory.

*Measures of Identity and Desistance*

There is little quantitative research exploring the relationship between identity and criminal desistance. Part of the scarcity in research is due to a lack of definitional clarity and consistency in identity theories of desistance. For example, it is often expressed that even in the broader field of sociology researchers have yet to agree on a singular measure of identity (Rise, Sheeran, and Hukkelberg 2010). Furthermore, because desistance itself is a process over the life course, the length of time required to thoroughly measure any theory of desistance must rely on longitudinal data. However, most current longitudinal data offered in the field today do not offer such specific quantitative conceptualizations of identity directly. Nonetheless, there is still some research that has attempted to test the empirical validity of such theories. For example, Paternoster et al. (2016) attempted to measure changes in criminal identity through offenders who may or may not have suffered from addiction to substances. They compared self-reported substance addiction through survival and hazard time-series analysis to actual re-arrest rates within the population of ex-offenders. Paternoster et al. (2016) found that those with an identity considered to be geared more towards prosocial activities and/or actively worked on removing associations with drug abuse helped to prolong survival time.

Rocque et al. (2016) offer the most robust study attempting to quantitively measure identity desistance theory. They utilize data from the Rutgers Health and Human Development Project (HHDP) to measure what they define as *"personal identity"* (p. 55). This was done by addressing questions focused more on what individuals believed about themselves. An example would be focusing on whether or not an individual believed they were a good person rather than identifying themselves in terms of group/social identity.

Additionally, Rocque et al. (2016) attempted to measure the psychometric properties of their variables by utilizing Cronbach's α and factor analysis of each time period respondents were interviewed. Overall, they found that during the first time periods of the test measures were less reliable with a Cronbach score of .34. However, the Cronbach scores in following time waves 2, 3, 4, and 5 were relatively stable measuring a .61, .55, .61, and .62 respectively. Rocque et al. (2016) hypothesized that the lack of reliability at the first time wave was indicative of rapid and uncertain changes in identity that we might normally see at these ages. Overall, these examinations are well suited to the larger discussion of desistance theory but lack a specific focus on one of the most important populations of offenders – those in emerging adulthood.

*Identity Theories of Desistance and Emerging Adulthood*

Arnett (2000) first coined the term "emerging adulthood" to support the idea that between the ages of 18-25 most individuals experience notable shifts in their identities. This distinct shift in identity is postulated to have a significant differentiation between other points in one's life that warrants a special categorization. Although there is still much debate over what different factors are appropriated during emerging adulthood, research has begun to highlight the need for the criminal justice system to develop more appropriate techniques to gear toward individuals who are a part of this distinct category (Coyle 2019; Coyle, Maruna, and Marsh 2015). Coyle (2019) utilized the population of those in emerging adulthood to draw a parallel between the concept of maturity and the developing attitudes of those in the process of desistance. It was discovered that the subjective nature of maturity helps to build an identity that otherwise might negate positive experiences with identity in those experiencing emerging adulthood. Some

researchers even argue that this "crisis of identity" is enough to warrant special legal exclusion that otherwise might be placed on a person(s) at age 18 (Farrington, Loeber, and Howell 2012). Emerging adulthood is a critical conceptualization of a population of individuals, especially in relation to desistance and reentry. Additionally, it is important to recognize that the essential components of emerging adulthood, desistance, and reentry can all be evaluated through one of the most common findings in all of criminology – the age crime curve.

Researchers have spent considerable time evaluating the link between patterns of offending and age groups. The age crime curve is one of the most well-understood patterns in all of criminological research. That is, the understanding that crime peaks in late adolescents and begins to decline in the early to middle 20s (Loeber and Farrington 2014). This finding is key to investigating broader themes of criminal offending. Scholars still disagree on the main causal factors behind this pattern. Explanations vary widely across disciplines. For example, Warr (1993) suggests that youth delinquency and the relation between age and crime are influenced by delinquent peers. Meanwhile, researchers like Kanazawa (2003) explain that sociological explanations for the age-crime curve are not sufficient – theorizing instead the influence of evolutionary psychology on decisions to offend around certain ages. In either case, the extensive findings of this powerful criminological theme reach into the discussion of those in emerging adulthood and, by virtue, warrant a closer investigation into its underlying mechanisms.

Ultimately, it is important to recognize that while much crime occurs at the height of the age-crime curve it is also when desistance begins to establish itself. There is little

current research investigating this critical understanding. Hill, Blokland, and van der Geest (2016) attempted to determine an explanation behind the dip in the age-crime curve utilizing Moffit's (1993) taxonomies and their relation to desistance. They found that the more an individual participated in "adult activities" the more likely they were to refrain from delinquency, marking themselves as adolescent-limited offenders (Hill et al. 2016). While this is certainly a useful finding, as the authors point out, there is still a large amount of ambiguity as to what adult activities are, and what exactly the mechanisms are behind this phenomenon. This shortcoming is common in research related to the area of desistance and the age-crime curve. Understanding how these processes work, especially in such a salient population of individuals as it relates to desistance and reentry, is vital to begin breaking down and helping solve issues of reentry.

# Chapter 3: Research Question and Hypothesis

The current study will begin to bridge the gap in this research by examining the mechanisms of identity/cognitive change in the population of emerging adulthood as it relates to reentry. Specifically, it will attempt to determine whether or not cognitive/identity change in justice-involved youth influences incidents of offending. Prior research suggests that cognitive/identity change does have an impact on future rates of criminal offending (Giordano et al. 2002; Hallett and McCoy 2015). However, most of the research does not focus specifically on emerging adults. As previously mentioned, this population is especially vulnerable to constant changes in cognitive/identity and is a pivotal point in one's life as it relates to desistance. Therefore, it may be that identity change is a salient factor for their desistance. More specifically, a change, no matter how small, from a criminal to a non-criminal identity could have a large impact on the reduction of the rate of offending in the future. Finally, most studies utilize qualitative rather than quantitative methods. Taking a quantitative approach to these issues may help to address questions in a more concise manner. By examining whether or not cognitive/identity changes of ex-offenders in this population results in future rates of offending, the current research will begin to pave the way for future scholars to further investigate this phenomenon with the ultimate goal of helping to reduce rates of re-offending and re-arrest moving forward.

# Chapter 4: Methods

*Data*

The current study will utilize data from the *Pathways to Desistance* database, a

multi-site longitudinal assessment of 1,354 serious adolescent offenders sentenced in

juvenile and adult courts from Maricopa County, Arizona (N=654) and Philadelphia

County, Pennsylvania (N=700). At the time of an offense, respondents were between the

ages of 14-18 years old. Interviewees were initially enrolled for baseline interviews

between November 2000 and January of 2003 within 90 days of their decertification

hearing or adult arraignment. Decertification hearings refer to legal judgments given by

judges to transfer juveniles from adult sentencing back to juvenile proceedings.

Following baseline, follow-up interviews were conducted 10 more times at intervals of 6

months for the first 3 years and then annually for the next 4 years with the final interview

being 7 years post-hearing. 1,170 of the respondents were male making up 86.4% of the

sample while 184 respondents were female representing only 13.6% of the overall

sample. Ethnicities of the sample were Caucasian (N=274) 20.2%, African American

(N=561) 41.4%, Hispanic (N=454) 33.5%, and other (N=65) 4.8%.

The database sought to investigate three key concepts in the life course of serious

adolescent offenders. They are (1) determining possible patterns of a cessation from

antisocial activities (2) uncovering the role of context and development in response to

changes in antisocial behavior; and (3) directly comparing the effect of

interventions/sanctions in promoting change (Mulvey 2012; 2017). As such, six domains

were investigated. These areas are listed as:

> (1) background characteristics (e.g., demographics, academic achievement, psychiatric
> diagnoses, offense history, neurological functioning, psychopathy, personality), (2)
> indicators of individual functioning (e.g., work and school status and performance,

substance abuse, mental disorder, antisocial behavior), (3) psychosocial development and attitudes (e.g., impulse control, susceptibility to peer influence, perceptions of opportunity, perceptions of procedural justice, moral disengagement), (4) family context (e.g., household composition, quality of family relationships), (5) personal relationships (e.g., quality of romantic relationships and friendships, peer delinquency, contacts with caring adults), and (6) community context (e.g., neighborhood conditions, personal capital, and community involvement). (Mulvey 2017 p. 1)

The database is unique in its efforts to follow serious offending adolescent cohorts through their incarceration/justice involvement and their reentry back into the community. Furthermore, it is one of the only longitudinal data sets we have that includes such a large and diverse population of adolescents. Unlike past research, the diverse sample of individuals involved in the study is better poised to address questions of criminal identity, desistance, and reentry for all demographics (Giordano et al. 2002; Loeber et al. 2015; Piquero 2015). Additionally, the database boasts an average retention rate of 90% through all 10 interview cycles. Cumulative retention rates for 10/10 interviews completed were 63.3% overall. These factors display evidence that the data gathered over time in the pathways to desistance study are fairly proportional to their original sample of respondents – providing a strong base for empirical validity.

The current research is focused on analyzing the baseline interview for individuals already 18 years of age (n=111), once other participants reach 18 in follow-up interviews and the final interview year, spanning a mix between 4-7 years from mid-adolescents to young adulthood. Given the pathway to desistance database's remarkable retention rate through all waves (84% by the final wave), utilizing these portions of the data provides the most comprehensive picture of the original sample while also allowing for the greatest length of time for a conceivable change. Specifically, in the final wave, 1,134 respondents completed a full interview, 12 of the original respondents partially completed the survey, and 89 did not return for an interview. 71% of the final wave were

male (n=962) and 12.7% were female (n=172). The ages in this wave ranged from 20-26, with ages 22, 23, and 24 accounting for 66.5% of the overall sample size. Finally, ethnicities for the final wave were recorded as Caucasian 20.2%, African American 41.4%, Hispanic 33.5%, and other as 4.8%.

**Dependent Variable**

*Delinquency and Criminal Offending*

Criminal offending will be measured by utilizing both re-arrest rates and voluntary self-reports of crimes. In order to cover the lasting impacts of certain variables, life-event calendars were utilized to measure the monthly level of legal activities for respondents. These were activities such as antisocial behavior and involvement in the legal system. The use of life-event calendars has shown to be especially helpful when trying to measure the temporal effects of variables like deviant activity and arrest (Roberts and Horney 2010). Furthermore, the database also acknowledges that self-reports by themselves cannot be 100% reliable and as such have attempted to corroborate data through FBI records, and juvenile/adult court records. Data is available and will be used for both the frequency and type of crime being measured. Research has shown there are strengths and weaknesses with both methods and that, generally, they share somewhat of a connection with one another (Monahan and Piquero 2009). Overall, this variable will be useful in determining if perceived changes in offending identities match delinquent activities.

**Independent Variable**

*Criminal Identity*

Identity will be measured utilizing the *Perceptions of Chances for Success* construct which was adapted from Menard & Elliott's (1996) research and is designed to measure adolescents' views on their future success as adults. Respondents were asked questions regarding their personal feelings and predictions towards their futures regarding employment, their families, and their ability to remove themselves from committing crimes/antisocial behavior. Questions were split between respondents' aspirations for future life events and their expectations. An example of a question asked was "how important is it for you to stay out of trouble with the law". A total of 14 items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "not at all important/poor" to "very important/excellent". Respondents who scored highest on the test indicated greater confidence in aspirations/expectations for their lives moving forward. Total scores for internal consistency were found to be reliable with a .67 for *aspirations* for work, family, and law, and .81 for *expectations* for work, family, and law.

Identity is an inherently difficult concept to operationalize. Similar to Rocque et al. (2016), criminal identity in this study is focused on an individual's beliefs about themselves rather than their perceptions of social identity (something like what cultural group you identify with). It is hypothesized that if an individual experiencing emerging adulthood receives a higher rating in their aspirations and expectations for law-abiding futures, they are farther along with the cognitive processes of desistance. Specifically, it would showcase what Giordano et al. (2002) would characterize as arguably the most important change in leaving behind a criminal identity – willingness to change. If an

individual was not willing to transition from their criminal identity, they would not have as strong of a conceptualization of future law-abiding successes.

**Analytical Strategy**

To investigate the relationship between identity and offending in the population of emerging adulthood the current study proposes to utilize change score analysis (also known as gain scores or difference scores) to determine the change of identity from baseline, or once the age of 18, to the final wave. Change score analysis is similar to paired t-test and ANCOVA methods of statistical analysis. It is designed to measure the differences between pretest and posttest scores. There is some controversy related to the usage of change scores compared to other methods that have been used to measure the change in variables over time. Several concerns have been introduced revolving around statistical bias, regression towards a mean, and general reliability (Cronbach and Furby 1970; Lin and Hughes 1997; Linn and Slinde 1977). Despite these concerns, there are disagreements as to the scope, applicability, and validity of the critiques themselves. Specifically, many scholars and statisticians have pointed out flaws in arguments issued by critics of gain score analysis (Oakes and Feldman 2001; Rogosa and Willett 1983). Additionally, there are arguments for the usage of change scores as a more nuanced approach for interindividual change (Willett 1988). This is a helpful understanding as it relates to the current study and its questions regarding change in the individual compared to others. Specifically, it showcases how their different levels of identity/cognitive change may differ amongst offenders. Ultimately, change score analysis is being used

because of its ability to capture perceived change in the measurement of someone's criminal identity.

The results of the change score analysis will then be used as a variable to indicate levels of change per respondent. Once this analysis is run, it will be compared to the final rates of reported offending and criminal records during wave 7. This will be done for both variety and frequency of offending. An ordinary least squares (OLS) logistic regression model will be used for the bivariate evaluation of the relationship between the change in identity and overall offending. An OLS logistic regression model is being used to determine the significance of the relationship between these two variables. All other variables in the study will be controlled in an effort to determine the direct effects of these two variables independent of the cofounders.

# Chapter 5: Discussion

*Summary*

      The question being investigated involves whether or not perceived identity affects desistance upon a return to the community specifically in relation to individual future offending among emerging adults. In terms of identity desistance theory, there is a general lack of empirical research supporting underlying core assumptions – especially compared to structural desistance theories. In addition, from what little research there is, most are qualitative studies (Paternoster et al. 2016; Rocque et al. 2016). Furthermore, as a whole, reentry has continued to be a contentious subject among scholars. Ongoing debate continues to encapsulate what programs and frameworks are most efficient. Finally, age is arguably the strongest correlate of crime predictability in criminology. Emerging adulthood most of all because of its association with the age-crime curve and transitionary period associated with desistance theories. These three concepts tied together may provide a unique insight into pathways guided towards withdrawing from criminal behavior.

*Implications*

    Several implications can be derived from the current research. While contrasting in subtle ways, Maruna (2001), Giordano et al. (2002), and Paternoster and Bushway (2009) all take a divergent approach to the study of desistance and crime over the life course. The bulk of their work concerns the burgeoning idea of cognitive or identity change as a key motivating factor behind continued restraint from past criminal activity. As Paternoster and Bushway (2009 p. 1108) put "desistance comes about as a result of the offender *willfully* changing his identity and both working toward something positive in

the future and steering from something feared." A connection between the independent

and dependent variables will reinforce the theoretical assumptions of these different

scholars. Mainly, it will showcase the effect of changes in cognitive/identity on a

criminal offender. Furthermore, it will underscore the importance of examining the

specific population of those experiencing emerging adulthood and its relationship with

continued desistance. If the statistical connection between the independent and dependent

variables appears weak, there may be cause to further scrutinize the applicability of these

theoretical models. In all, a significance between variables may signify the ability of non-

structural desistance theories to better address trends in criminality over the life course.

Along with theoretical implications, there are numerous practical/policy

implications. In the realm of reentry assessment, questions arise regarding practicality

associated with Risk Needs Responsivity given its long history of application paired with

its inability to deter the large rates of recidivism in the United States. The findings from

the current study may emphasize an even greater need for RNR to tailor its guiding

principles more towards a positivist approach to rehabilitation. This means addressing

cognitive transformation and self-perception before criminogenic traits. There is also the

possibility of dropping RNR altogether and favoring more novel approaches to reentry

practices like the Good Lives Model (GLM). The GLM, unlike other frameworks of

reentry, is more focused on human capital as a motivating factor in the reentry process.

The GLM is described as being:

> Built around the concept of *good lives* and is concerned with providing offenders with the
> psychological and social capital to fashion ways of living that are personally endorsed
> and that result in reduced offending. (Law & Ward 2011 p. 11-12)

In this way, GLM concentrates more on identity construction in the context of the

community and other social structures – an approach possibly oriented more towards

themes of desistance originally developed by life course identity theorists such as Maruna (2001) and Giordano et al. (2002). Beyond a reconsideration for evaluative frameworks of those reentering the community, the importance of assessing programs themselves and if they are designed in such a way as to foster the appropriate change in ex-offenders must not be understated.

The current research may also support more innovative suggestions for reentry programs depending on whether or not it finds that there is a connection between changes of identity and future offending. For example, Bushway and Uggen (2021) challenge the common convention of past reentry programs by arguing we need to drop the concept of reentry altogether, as it is too closely tied to ideas centered around structural desistance changes. This rationalization transverses widely held beliefs of the need for inmates to receive vocational training as an outlet for the prevention of future recidivism. Based on structural desistance theory, these types of programs may appear helpful at the outset. However, identity theories of desistance (along with the current research's ability to magnify or doubt their assumptions) question the breadth of such theories to fully encapsulate desistance. You can give a formerly incarcerated individual a job. However, that job opportunity may not be helpful if the ex-offender is still stuck in their old ways and has not made the correct cognitive changes to envision themselves as someone who does not engage in pro-criminal activities. This distinctive approach may take the form of several different suggestions and improvements to reentry programs. For example, recently Fader and Talley (2021) highlighted the necessity of "respect" in the juvenile justice system as a cornerstone for rehabilitation and eventual release. Respect is tailored towards more effective communications between those in emerging adulthood and the

agents tasked with monitoring such populations (Fader and Talley 2021). The concept of respect ties into identity theories of desistance as they both deal with trying to understand and foster a positive atmosphere focused on growing the appropriate internal cognitive mechanisms that are said to aid in long-term desistance from crime. Ultimately, if the current research does find that there is an association between identity and criminal offending, the door opens for a more in-depth consideration into programs that might help build a dramatic shift in self-perception.

*Limitations*

There are two main limitations to the current study. Firstly, it is essential to remember that desistance is understood to be a continuous process (Bersani and Doherty 2018; Bushway et al. 2001; Laub and Sampson 2001). It does not stop at any one point in an ex-offender's life. The analysis undergone by the current study is only capable of capturing identity change and offending in a small window of time. Specifically, it can, at most, capture the desistance efforts of serious violent offenders over 7 years. While this is a fair amount of time to analyze such processes, the more data one has over a longer period, the more empirically and theoretically sound the findings will be. Secondly, as mentioned above, identity is a notoriously difficult concept to operationalize. Like many other terms in academia, the lack of a consolidated definition makes it very difficult to draw accurate, valid, and reliable findings/implications. One scholar's definition of identity could very well differ in great theoretical lengths from another. There is always the possibility that identity, as it is measured in the current study, does not accurately reflect the definitions/conceptions in all of the theories described above. In that case, findings may

only reflect certain components of a theory or possibly outright refute it. However, the current study has done its best to operationalize these concepts under the constraint of utilizing pre-set survey questions during an interview.

*Conclusions and Future Directions*

There is an urgent need to re-think the ways in which we treat and release offenders in the United States. The current research has attempted to critique and address one possible avenue of change for consideration. In the future, more research is needed to identify the effect of cognitive/identity change in offenders to better address issues of reentry. This is particularly the case for those undergoing emerging adulthood. This process can be done by conducting more sophisticated measures of examination of the desistance process such as time-series analysis. A time-series analysis might allow for more accurate measures of pertinent variables in an individual's trajectory. It might also allow researchers to better grasp the temporal ordering of appropriate variables such as identity - which may constantly fluctuate over time. Along with more sophisticated quantitative methods, researchers should continue to design qualitative methods to better gauge the cognitive and identity principles laid out in desistance theories. The nature of such terms makes it inherently difficult to operationalize. Conducting methods adapted more towards descriptive/personal stories, like Maruna (2001) and Giordano et al. (2002) might help to clarify an otherwise ambiguous concept. In conclusion, drawing together concepts of identity/cognitive theories of desistance, reentry, and emerging adulthood may be a critical turning point in readdressing the way the American criminal justice system deals with those being released from prisons and jails across the continent.

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