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'It's Just Not Worth it': How Juvenile Offenders Begin to Desist from Crime, a Thematic Analysis

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Desistance is the long-term cessation of offending behaviour. Desistance has been conceptualised as a process that includes setbacks and lapses. By understanding desistance, we can make efforts to support offenders to move away from crime and reduce re-offending. Existing research focuses on adult ex-offender's retrospective accounts of how they stopped offending. Research neglects both the beginning of the desistance process and the juvenile offender population. Furthermore, it has been suggested that understanding the role of the Youth Justice System (YJS) and Youth Offending Teams (YOTs) in this process could enhance desistance.

Juvenile Offenders

Society believes that children and adults have different cognitive and behavioural processes¹. Hence, we have distinct adult and youth justice systems (YJS). The Independent Commission on Youth Crime and Antisocial Behaviour (2010)² suggest that, unlike adults, children are still developing, so responses to their offending should reflect this. They advocate a YJS based on restoration, prevention and integration.

The Crime and Disorder Act (1998) led to the creation of the Youth Justice Board (YJB), a non-departmental public body which oversees England and Wales' YJS³. The Act also introduced Youth Offending Teams (YOTs) in every county, multi-agency teams consisting of police, social workers, child and

adolescent mental health services (CAMHs), youth workers and educational psychologists. They are responsible for the assessment and supervision of offenders under the age of 18 years who are serving part, or all, of their sentence in the community.

Within the literature, the term 'young offender' refers to those aged 18-21 years who have committed a crime, while 'juvenile offender' refers to those under 18 years old who have committed a crime. The current research will refer to YOTs and the YJS, who call their 10-17 year old cohort 'young offenders' but to remain consistent with existing research, I shall refer to this age group as 'juvenile offenders' and 'juveniles'.

Within 12 months of being cautioned or convicted, 42.2 per cent of juveniles re-offended, committing an average of 3.79 further offences each⁴. Over the last two decades, crime, particularly youth crime, has fallen⁵. This reduction in the number of children in the CJS has resulted in a smaller, more challenging caseload of juvenile offenders⁶. These cohorts have a wide range of needs that should be addressed to encourage desistance, thus, approaches to working with this cohort must be tailored and flexible⁷. Furthermore, local authorities should have the freedom to adopt more integrated ways to promote individualised and local solutions to offending⁸. To support this, the Inspectorate of Probation called for more research on what may work to reduce this and suggested that this should incorporate juveniles' views of their offending⁹. The present research aimed to do this.

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5. Taylor, C. (2016). *Review of the youth justice system in England and Wales*. Retrieved from: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/review-of-the-youth-justice-system>
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Defining Desistance

Desistance is the long-term cessation of offending¹⁰. In theory, the idea of desistance — to abstain from offending — is clear¹¹. However, it is difficult to know when behaviour has stopped completely, making it challenging to agree on how desistance should be defined, operationalised and measured. Having such varied definitions of desistance can make it hard to compare findings across studies if the one employed is not explicitly stated¹².

There are conflicting conceptualisations of measuring desistance regarding behaviour. Despite one's best intentions, changing behaviour is difficult and may involve periods of reverting to previous behaviours¹³. Hence, it is difficult to distinguish between complete desistance and lulls in offending. Some suggest several years should pass before behaviour can be referred to as desistance, while others believe you can never know if someone has genuinely desisted until they have died¹⁴. Also, desistance research often relies on official reconviction data to determine whether someone is successful in desisting from crime. However, this may not be reliable as it is possible that individuals are not caught and are not honest about this in subsequent self-report¹⁵. It has also been questioned whether someone is desisting if they have stopped breaking laws but continue to engage in harmful behaviour — for example, if they do not return

Despite one's best intentions, changing behaviour is difficult and may involve periods of reverting to previous behaviours.

borrowed money to friends¹⁶. Similarly, it has been suggested that a distinction could be made between desistance as a complete termination of activity, as committing less serious crimes (desistance as diminished seriousness), and as less frequent criminal acts (desistance as diminished frequency)¹⁷.

Growing up includes multiple transitions rather than a one-off change¹⁸. Instead of seeing desistance as an end state that can be objectively measured, it can be understood as a process. Rather than when the behaviour stops, we should look at how — for example, by examining the events that produced the termination¹⁹. Desistance has been conceptualised as akin to recovery from substance addiction, involving setbacks and changes in motivation, rather than a straightforward progression towards abstinence²⁰. Due to its dynamic and non-linear nature, desistance is seen as an inherently individual process²¹. The present research aimed to explore desistance in a way that takes into account its unique and individualised nature.

Theories and Research into Desistance

There are two broad categories for theories of desistance that informed the current research: structural theories and agency theories. It is largely accepted within the

current literature that desistance is likely a combination or integration of factors from structural and agency theories²².

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22. King, S. (2013). Early desistance narratives: A qualitative analysis of probationers' transitions towards desistance. *Punishment & Society*, 15(2), 147-165. doi: 10.1177/1462474513477790

Structural theories. The earliest theories suggest that desistance is natural due to maturation. The ‘age-crime curve’ is now well-established and suggests offending starts in early-to-mid adolescence, peaks during late adolescence and then gradually declines until it stops for most people — around the age of 25²³. This decline was believed to be because of a natural reduction in criminality and the preference for crime²⁴. Others suggest desistance occurs by default because of individuals experiencing pivotal events which they called ‘life-course events’ or ‘turning points’, for example, getting married²⁵. These events are seen to create an opportunity for individuals to ‘knife-off’ their past. However, opportunities for turning points, such as securing employment or housing, are less accessible to juveniles or could exacerbate anti-social behaviour.

Agency theories. Clarke and Cornish²⁶ argue that desisters decide to give up crime. This may be due to the burnout of offending, the deterrent effects of the Criminal Justice System (CJS), or a rational consideration of the advantages and disadvantages of crime²⁷. Juveniles are described as impulsive and spontaneous meaning that agency theories, which emphasise choice and motivation, are less applicable to their desistance.

Existing literature focuses on those who have successfully stopped offending for an extended period and little research attempts to understand how it starts. If we understand the beginning of the process, more can be done to support offenders to begin to stop²⁸. As little is known about juvenile desistance, this research aimed to explore the how the process begins.

Method

Participants

Six participants were recruited through two different YOTs and all were males. Participants were between 13-18 years old (M_{age} = 15.67 years, SD = 2.16). Five were white British and one was Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME). Three were in education while the others were not in education, employment or training (NEET). Participants were diverse regarding

their sentences, offences and previous involvement with the YJS.

In this research, desistance was defined as a current period of non-offending. YOT staff were asked to identify any juvenile who had ceased offending. As mentioned, defining desistance is often contested within the literature. To avoid approaching the sample with pre-conceived ideas of what desistance looked like, YOT staff were encouraged to be open-minded with desistance meaning that ‘ceased offending’ could be recently, in days, or for a significant period of time such as months. It could also be a shift in attitude or offending such as offending less frequently.

Participants were subject to a variety of interventions; three had a Referral Order; two were on a Youth Rehabilitation Order and one participant was on a Youth Conditional Caution.

Interviews lasted 15 to 37 minutes (M = 22 minutes). Although a general outline of the areas to be discussed was given, it was emphasised that the interview would take the lead from the participant and their experiences. A semi-structured interview guide was used to cover broad topics from the desistance literature but allow new insights to arise. This was developed with staff from one YOT who helped to formulate the wording of questions to ensure this was appropriate for juveniles understanding.

Data Analysis

Interviews were recorded on a Dictaphone and then transcribed verbatim. As some features of spoken language can be important for interpreting data²⁹, filler words and emphasis (indicated by underline) were included during transcription.

Thematic analysis, a qualitative method for identifying patterns within data, was used to analyse transcripts. Noticeable patterns in a dataset constitute a theme which is then used to address and interpret the research question³⁰.

Results

Five themes were identified regarding how juvenile offenders begin to desist and the role that the YJS and

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YOT play in this. These were; staying away from trouble, changing relationships, learning to control anger, taking steps towards employment and engaging with the YOT. These themes and their sub-themes are discussed below.

Figure 1 provides a visual representation of the themes and sub-themes.

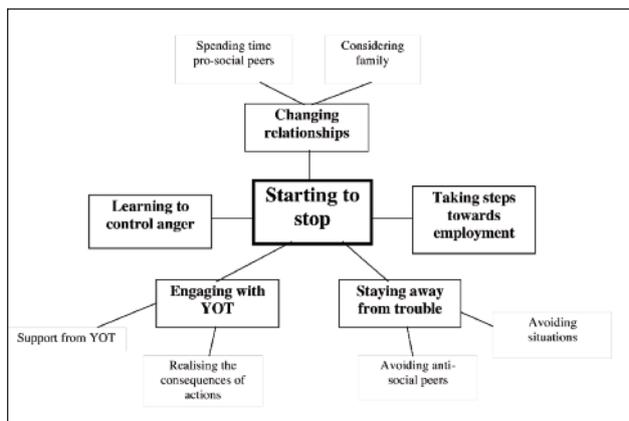


Figure 1: Diagram of the five themes and their sub-themes

Staying Away from Trouble

Avoiding anti-social peers. Avoiding anti-social peers was mentioned in almost every participant's interview when asked how they were trying to stop offending. A decision was made to 'stop hanging around' with peers they had previously offended with. Max stopped seeing the peer he co-offended with as he became aware of the 'peer pressure' he felt when with him:

He always used to get me into trouble... I shouldn't of let him talk me into it.

Similarly, Steve described his offence as 'a kid showing off in front of his friends'.

Some participants simply stopped seeing friends. Jack reassessed his friendship group after seeing his friend get shot, explaining:

I stopped hanging around with them from then cause I went I ain't getting shot.

For others, avoiding peers was less straightforward. For Jack, his anti-social peers were his only friends, so some initiative was required to keep away from them:

What I do if they come round now is just say I'm grounded.

However, despite his best efforts, Jack admitted that there were times when he does go out and can lapse into offending. Jack stressed that, compared to

the thousands of pounds worth of items he used to steal every day, the crimes he continues to commit are less serious and less frequent:

Yeah I admit it yeah I do go out the occasional time and if I'm like in a like little corner shop and I want a drink got no money yeah I will steal it... but I'm nowhere near as bad as what I used to be.

Avoiding situations. Five of the six participants mentioned staying away from certain situations in order to desist. Steve, whose offence involved retaliating to provocation which led to an assault, was hoping to prevent himself from re-offending by 'avoiding situations in the first place'. Alex describes his efforts to avoid confrontation:

I try and keep out of fights now whereas before...let's just say I would've probably been like one of the first ones in.

Later on, he describes walking away from fights when he hears them by finding friends to go elsewhere with as a way of protection from re-offending. Alex's offence was a consequence of his school having a 'rival school', so his method was:

I keep away from areas that I know that I have... issues with people.

Alex relies on social media to receive intelligence regarding the location of pupils from the rival school. Alex now uses this information to avoid these areas whereas he admitted that he previously would have deliberately gone to a location where the rival school were known to be.

As well as local locations, Liam began to desist by avoiding a whole city, having relocated from the city in which is committed his offences. Liam and Max had stopped going out all night. Max had stopped spending time on the streets as he recognised this often resulted in one of his peers suggesting committing an offence:

I used to love it I'd go out on the streets all the time but it used to get me in trouble... like someone says like come do a bladdy blah and then they drag you into it and it's like ah come on then let's do it.

Some participants' planned to move out or move away. Liam was hoping to secure accommodation and move out of his mother's house. He stated this would help him to maintain his desistance. Max felt he should move away from the area in order to maintain a lawful life.

Changing Relationships

Spending time with pro-social and supportive peers. Following a decision to stop spending time with peers that had a negative influence on themselves, participants described spending more time with pro-social and supportive peers. As Jack puts it:

You hang around with people that get arrested all the time you're just gonna get arrested all the time with them if you hang around with people that don't get arrested that do the right thing you're fine.

Participants described a reassurance that the groups of friends they were spending time with now would help aid their desistance by preventing them from re-offending and offering safety in numbers. When thinking about the possibility of fighting, Steve stated:

My friends would just push them away... and just stick up for me...they wouldn't actually try fighting.

Similarly, Alex felt that staying with his new group of pro-social peers offered him protection, explaining that:

Where we have quite a large group of friends, if a fight did break out they'd all try and split it up anyway...so it's not like I'd be on my own.

Alex's friends also reminded him of his previous involvement with YOT in situations which could escalate. He commented that they stepped in to advise him to steer clear of further arrests.

Where some participants felt comfort in a large group of friends, others had decided the opposite was better for them, preferring to keep friendships to a minimum. Jack commented:

I only really hang around with this one person.

Likewise, Max cut contact with the majority of his friends following a decision to stop offending when he found out he was going to become a father:

I don't talk to none of my friends no more either I stopped hanging around with all of

them but um some of them ain't even done anything wrong some of them are just genuinely nice friends I just stopped hanging around with all of them...

Considering one's family. A minority of participants mentioned their efforts to repair relationships with family as important for beginning to desist. Dave, whose victim was his grandmother, spoke about how he is beginning to regain her trust. Similarly, Jack had reassessed his behaviour towards his grandmother, by whom he is cared for, after conversations with other family members. He had begun to improve the way he behaves with her, 'a lot':

I was just horrible to my nan and um my mum had a talk to me about it and then my uncle had a talk to me about it...I respect my nan...all the things she does for me I shouldn't be horrible to her.

When you get to the point where you don't know what you're doing you cannot remember anything you're just, just extremely angry.

As mentioned, Max's experience of becoming a father meant that now he had his daughter to consider, he was motivated to maintain his desistance for her sake. She acted as a reason to stay out of trouble and avoid imprisonment so that he could be a father to her.

I think ... my little girl, I think that is the reason that's made me sort things out..

ain't no other reason to it.

Learning to Control Anger

All six participants mentioned learning to control their anger as a way they were trying to move away from offending. Steve stated:

I wanna try control my anger so I don't lose my temper as much.

Steve described experiencing 'blackouts', which he said he experienced during his offence. He defined these as:

When you get to the point where you don't know what you're doing you cannot remember anything you're just, just extremely angry.

Steve explained that he is currently working on this with his YOT worker during their appointments:

It's mainly just general talking, trying to find a way to control my anger and to find out the points of where I start to have enough and then to just try walk away before it gets to that point, like recognising the signs of me losing my temper.

Similarly, Jack had been working on his anger during his supervision sessions. Jack's YOT worker had found a new outlet for his anger:

I started doing boxing... so I can control my anger and it has been working.

Taking Steps towards Employment

No participants spontaneously mentioned employment or education as being important for moving away from crime. When asked about a job, participants had vague ideas — for example, Alex would do 'probably anything with sport'. For now, participants were taking the initial steps towards employment in the future such as choosing relevant BTEC options for their career interest.

Alex continually reminded himself of the impact on his employability if he were to re-offend. Jack had considered joining the Navy like his uncle. His uncle spoke to him about the likelihood of him getting into the Navy if he continued his behaviour which prompted him to stop smoking cannabis.

Max wanted a job to 'keep my mind off things' and 'keeping my mind motivated'. Similarly, Liam said that boredom was a trigger for his past offending and is a current trigger for temptations to offend. He agreed that having a job could occupy his time instead.

Engaging with the YOT

Support from the YOT. Participants acknowledged the work their case manager had done beyond their intervention. For example, Alex commented that he had 'got a lot of support' as his YOT worker had liaised with his school regarding Alex's preferred communication methods to prevent his behaviour escalating in class. Steve's comment about his YOT worker demonstrated the rapport she had built with him:

She knows the right things to say if that makes sense.

This personalised approach was also appreciated by Alex. When asked if the YOT could have helped him in any other way, he replied:

I think they got it so it's specific to me so they know how to help me.

Realising the consequences of actions. A common theme in participants' narratives was clarity around understanding the consequences of one's actions. For Jack, family members who were homeless and had substance misuse issues helped him to understand the reality of his continued behaviour:

I used to not care...if I got in trouble with the police I tell em to piss off...I had a talk with my mum she said if you carry on doing what you're doing you're gonna turn out like me and I said mum I ain't turning out like you and she went that's what's gonna happen if you carry on being like this...It's just...chucking your life away

I start to have enough and then to just try walk away before it gets to that point, like recognising the signs of me losing my temper.

The YJS was often mentioned as a push away from offending. All five participants who had been to court commented that it was 'scary'. Jack described his close shave with prison:

It was either 9 months referral order and a 250 pound fine or it was a month in prison and I weren't doing that, 9 months go quicker than a month in prison, my mum was in there for 18 months and she said the days felt like weeks.

Similarly, Max was surprised he did not receive a custodial sentence for his offence:

I was quite shocked actually when they gave me this one I didn't think I'd get [a referral order] again, I thought I was going to prison to be honest.

For other participants, like Dave, the threat of prison was enough:

This judge said if I offend again um if I end up in court again...he will put me in

prison...if I do another stupid thing...I would be going straight to prison...I probably won't cope in prison.

Others commented on the likelihood of being caught if they re-offended, which they had learnt from their experiences of being arrested or convicted. Steve's offence was captured on closed-circuit television monitoring (CCTV) which had led to a realisation of the prevalence of cameras and the likelihood of getting caught offending:

You cannot get away with anything...the fact that there's so many cameras out there in the UK...so you can't get away with anything...it's better just to call the police on someone so they can get caught not you.

Similarly, Jack had come to realise that the likelihood of being able to avoid sanctioning if you did something unlawful was slim, and commented that reality was not like the video games he played:

See it's not like GTA [Grand Theft Auto] and Call of Duty and all them games you go around killing people, robbing people, robbing stuff and all that it's nothing like that... It's not like in the game where if you get the police you hide somewhere you lose em.

Jack also mentioned how the police were now aware of the tactics he used to lose them in a chase or conceal drugs when he was stopped. Therefore, he saw the likelihood of being caught as high and concluded that 'it's just not worth it'.

Participants mentioned the work they had done with YOT as helping them to understand what would happen if they continued offending. Liam's YOT worker had gone through the difference between the juvenile and adult CJS sanctions which had made him realise, as a recently turned 18 year old, the harsher punishments he could expect if he continued to offend. Alex, who was found in possession of a knife, read case studies with his YOT worker of incidents where fights escalated resulting in a fatal stabbing. He used these cases as a reminder of what could have happened when he was carrying the knife and what may happen if he re-offends.

Steve had previously been a victim of crime himself. The realisation that he had put someone else

through what he had experienced made him appreciate the seriousness of his actions.

Discussion

The current research supports conceptualisations of desistance as a process. Participants reported feeling tempted to offend and sometimes lapsing into criminal behaviour. Furthermore, no participant described his experience of desistance as a one-off event. Instead, they discussed steps they were taking to behave lawfully. This illustrates the zig-zag and non-linear nature of desistance. Interestingly, the current research also lends support to the subjective view of desistance and its definition. Max had completely stopped offending and

any behaviour he engaged in while offending — for example, using drugs. Whereas, Jack admitted to stealing occasionally, but emphasised that this was not to the extent he had previously stolen, in terms of both the frequency and amount. In this sense, Max's desistance can be seen as a complete termination of activity while Jack's is diminished seriousness and frequency.

The themes identified suggest desistance for these juveniles was similar to rational

choice theories where a conscious reassessment of the advantages and disadvantages of crime takes place due to some sort of shock or an increase in fear of punishment. Most participants mentioned their involvement with the YJS as a prompt to appraise their current offence as a close call with prison or fear further, harsher punishment. Even the participant who had been in custody twice reassessed his behaviour due to the idea of going to an adult prison now he is 18 years old. Overall, participants had begun to see further offending as 'not worth it' (Jack) and came to realise, 'it's all about decision making really and making the right choices' (Liam). This supports findings that adult offenders rationally desist to avoid further perceived harsh punishment. In this way, juvenile desistance appears similar to adults.

All participants mentioned continuous conscious decision-making in order to begin desistance which portrays the juveniles as active agents in their desistance process. The most pertinent example of this was the choice to 'stop hanging around' anti-social peers in favour of pro-social, protective peers. Deliberate decisions were made to avoid situations juveniles were aware could lead to offending which

Participants mentioned the work they had done with YOT as helping them to understand what would happen if they continued offending.

often involved creative attempts — for example, creating planned excuses like being grounded. Although it is not surprising that juveniles stop spending time with deviant peers to stop offending³¹, the present research was unique as it uncovered how juveniles do this instead of simply identifying it as a way to stop offending.

The finding that participants engaged in careful decision-making regarding their offending behaviour contradicts self-control views of criminality. Juvenile's offending is attributed to them being impulsive — meaning that theories of choice and motivation are inapplicable to their desistance³². Although participants often referred to their crimes as impulsive, their decision to stop was the opposite, as discussed. Most participants saw their offending as linked to anger and so had taken steps to manage this in other ways, such as through boxing or talking to their YOT worker, to avoid anti-social behaviour. Furthermore, the reference to temptations to offend and occasional lapses into offending demonstrates that opportunities to offend were still present for these juveniles. This would suggest that juveniles are applying self-control and rationality to remain crime-free.

Only one participant's desistance process provided support for Laub and Sampson's theory that life events serve as turning points away from crime³³. For Max, fatherhood had prompted him to stop offending and maintain his desistance. This lack of emphasis on turning points differs from adult resistance research. As no participants were employed, this illustrates the idea that this theory may not apply to juvenile desistance because of their age meaning they have limited exposure to opportunities for turning points³⁴.

With regards to the role that the YJS and YOTs played, this came across in two ways. First, juvenile's experience of the YJS or working with their YOT worker had improved their awareness with regards to consequences either in terms of further punishment, the potential for serious harm or the impact on their future prospects for employment. Second, juveniles valued their YOT worker tailoring interventions to the factors they had identified as needing to change in order to desist — for example, addressing their anger.

This reflects a person-centred and individualised approach to working with juveniles. It is well established that good working relationships enhance engagement³⁵ and previous research found supportive relationships between YOT staff and juveniles as being important for reducing re-offending³⁶. Therefore, the present research suggests that a good therapeutic relationship centred on the juvenile's needs is beneficial for desistance. The themes identified with regards to YOTs support the observation that caseloads are challenging and complex³⁷ and that, just as desistance has been illustrated to be individual, interventions aimed at addressing offending should be person-centred, holistic and flexible³⁸.

While this research shone light on an area previously neglected in the literature and gave juveniles a voice in doing so, it is important to note some limitations. First, despite efforts to build rapport, reinforce confidentiality and adopt an informal approach to interviews, it cannot be overlooked that my presence as an interviewer and researcher may well have influenced responses. It is possible that juveniles over stated their desistance in an effort to present as socially desirable or due to some concern that responses would affect progress on interventions with the YOT. Furthermore, by focusing on juveniles experience to ensure rich data from the target populations perspective is obtained, other opinions as to how they began to desist could have been missed. To address these limitations, future research should include the views of YOT professionals, teachers and parents/carers when considering how juveniles begin to desist and what supports this.

Final Thoughts

In order to support juvenile desistance in an increasingly complex cohort, we need to understand how the process begins and evolves. By utilising resources effectively in a targeted approach to areas that support desistance as detailed by juveniles themselves, society can prevent future victims and minimise further financial burdens on the criminal justice system.

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