CHAPTER 15

Desistance from Crime and Deviance as a Turning Point in the Life Course

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The transition to adulthood has generally become more individualized in the past 50 years, with fewer young people attaining the classic markers of adult status in an orderly progression (Buchman, 1989; Rindfuss, Swicegood, & Rosenfeld, 1987). The average age of first marriage or age of entry into full-time employment has also increased dramatically in recent decades (Shanahan, 2000). Despite such changes, however, the notion that adults eventually "settle down" and desist from delinquent and deviant behaviors persists across shifting familial and economic arrangements. As they become fully fledged adults, people generally cease or at least moderate many forms of criminal behavior, substance use, and other antisocial activities. In this chapter, we summarize theory and research on desistance from crime and deviance and explore the extent to which such desistance constitutes a separate dimension of the multifaceted transition to adulthood.

As in other areas of life course research, the study of desistance is concerned with the socially embedded processes that foster discontinuity in life pathways. Desistance from

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deviance is likely to influence and be influenced by transitions to marriage, full-time employment, and other markers (Sampson & Laub, 1993). Apart from its effects on other transitions, however, we argue that desistance from deviant roles may *itself* constitute an important dimension of the transition to adulthood. That is, "adult" status is less likely to be conferred on those who continue to engage in forms of deviant behavior associated with the adolescent period.

How can desistance from crime constitute a separate dimension of the transition to adulthood when most adults have no criminal history from which to desist? First, rates of official criminal punishment are rising rapidly. Approximately 59 million Americans had a state criminal history record on file in 1999 (U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2001a) and one study estimated that 28.5% of African American males will be incarcerated in a state or federal penitentiary over their lifetime (Bonczar & Beck, 1997). More importantly for our purposes, however, a long line of self-report research has demonstrated that almost every adolescent admits to some form of delinquency (e.g., see Gabor, 1994) and that rates of both official and self-reported criminal behavior decline precipitously in adulthood. According to the 2001 Monitoring the Future Study, for example, a majority of U.S. students have taken illicit drugs (primarily marijuana) and participated in binge drinking by the time they are seniors in high school (Johnston, O'Malley, & Bachman, 2002). The vast majority of these young people will soon settle down by moderating their substance use, ceasing activities such as shoplifting and fighting altogether and simultaneously assuming adult work and family roles. In this chapter, we discuss how desistance from crime is likely to be both a cause and consequence of transiting other life course markers and becoming an adult.

We begin by presenting some descriptive statistics illustrating the life course position of those officially defined as deviant—persons under correctional supervision. We then present some self-reported data from the general population, showing how markers of adult attainment co-vary with some forms of deviant and criminal behavior. Next we discuss important conceptual and methodological issues in defining and measuring desistance. After a brief discussion of existing theories of desistance, we consider the problem of reintegration. In particular, socioeconomic reintegration, familial reintegration, and civic reintegration operate as organizing concepts for understanding the relationship between desistance and life course transitions. Finally, we address cross-national or comparative work on desistance and the potential for future interventions to inform policy debates and scientific knowledge about desistance as a turning point in the life course.

DEVIANCE AND THE TIMING OF ADULT TRANSITIONS

Deviance and Adult Transitions in the Prison Population

In part because of their involvement with the criminal justice system, prison inmates and former inmates are generally "off-time" with regard to important markers of the transition to adulthood (Caspi, Elder, & Herbener, 1990). In taking stock of their circumstances, many lament that they have not got farther in life, building careers, forming families, purchasing houses, and taking on other adult roles (Shover, 1996; Uggen, Manza, & Behrens, 2002). Both qualitative and quantitative research suggests that the relationship between deviant behavior and normative role transitions is complex and reciprocal. For example, Sullivan's

(1989) *Getting paid*, an ethnographic study of youth work and crime in New York, showed how early delinquency may disrupt employment patterns, which in turn may engender further criminal behavior. This pattern of association has also been identified in a number of important quantitative studies. Analyzing a cohort of London boys born in the 1950s, Hagan (1993) finds that adolescent criminal "embeddedness," measured by delinquent activities, friends, and parental criminal convictions, delays the transition into full-time employment in young adulthood. Similarly, in a sample of American delinquent and non-delinquent boys born in the 1920s, Sampson and Laub (1993) report that early juvenile incarceration decreases later job stability, which, in turn, exacerbates adult criminal behavior. Thus, deviant activities and entry into adult occupational roles are likely to be reciprocally determined.

Many officially defined deviants are "off-time" because they have done time. State prison inmates represent the most extreme example of delayed entry into adult roles. Table 15-1 presents data from a large-scale nationally representative survey of state inmates conducted at approximately 5-year intervals since 1974. These repeated cross-sectional data show that the mean age of prison entry has risen steadily over this period, with prisoners now averaging over 30 years of age at admission. Despite their advancing age, however, few have attained the minimal markers of entry into adult status.

The classic markers for assessing socioeconomic transitions generally include school completion and entry into full-time employment. These data indicate that inmates have relatively low levels of educational attainment, with fewer than one third having achieved a high school diploma. Full-time employment levels have declined gradually since 1974, with a slim majority holding a full-time job prior to their most recent arrest in the 1997 survey. In contrast, over three fourths of males of comparable age in the general population held full-time jobs and 87% had attained a high school diploma or equivalency.

With regard to family markers, the percentage of married inmates has declined over time, from 24% in 1974 to 18% in 1997. The comparable figure in the general population is 53% for males in this age range. Despite low rates of marriage, most inmates are parents: 56% reported having one or more children in the most recent survey. Although trends such as declining rates of marriage and non-marital births mirror shifts in the larger society, the characteristics of the inmate population have remained relatively stable over the past 25 years. Compared to the non-institutionalized population, inmates have long been significantly off-time in terms of educational attainment and entry into full-time employment and marital unions.

What has changed, however, are the rate and absolute number of offenders entering prison and ex-offenders leaving prison. The state and federal prison population grew sixfold between 1974 and 1997 and now exceeds 1.4 million, with an additional 687,000 inmates currently held in local jails (U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2000a). When parolees and probationers are added to these figures, the total number of persons under correctional supervision now exceeds 6.3 million (U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2000a, 2000b). Although prison and jail inmates lag the farthest behind their contemporaries in the general population, members of other officially defined correctional populations are also likely to be off-time with regard to key adult life course transitions.

Deviance and Adult Transitions in the General Population

Of course, the incarcerated population represents the most extreme combination of socioeconomic disadvantage and high rates of criminal activity. Many people who commit crime

Table 15-1. Life Course Markers of Prison Inmates Prior to Incarceration, 1974–1997[a] and Comparable Data for Males Ages 25–34 in the General Population 1997[b,c]

	State prison inmate population			General population
Variables	1974	1986	1997	1997
Age at admission	26.5 (9.3)	27.6 (8.7)	32.5 (10.4)	
Current age	29.6 (10.0)	30.6 (9.0)	34.8 (10.0)	29.7
Education markers				
With HS Diploma/GED (%)	21.1	31.9	30.6	87.3
Mean years education	9.9 (2.5)	10.9 (2.7)	10.7 (2.5)	
Employment markers				
Full-time employed (%)	61.6	57.3	56.0	77.0
Part-time/Occasional (%)	7.3	11.6	12.5	12.1
Looking for work (%)	12.5	18.0	13.7	3.9
Not employed/Not looking (%)	18.5	13.0	17.8	7.0
Family markers				
Never married (%)	47.9	53.7	55.9	40.4
Currently married (%)	23.7	20.3	17.7	53.0
With children[c] (%)	60.2	60.4	56.0	66
Number of children	1.7 (2.0)	2.3 (1.7)	2.5 (1.9)	
Other characteristics				
Sex (% male)	96.7	95.6	93.7	100
Black, non-Hispanic (%)	49	45	47	12
White, non-Hispanic (%)	39	40	33	69
Hispanic (%)	10	13	17	14
Other (%)	2	3	3	5
Population				
Prisoners[d]	218,466	544,972	1,249,959	
Total supervision[d]		3,239,400	5,692,500	
Conviction offense				
Violent (%)	53	64	47	
Property (%)	33	22	22	
Drug (%)	10	9	21	
Other (%)	4	4	10	

Standard deviations for continuous variables in parentheses.

[a]Source: Uggen et al. (2000), adapted from U.S. Department of Justice's *Survey of Inmates in State and Federal Correctional Facilities*.

[b]General population data adapted from U.S. Census Bureau *Statistical Abstract* series and U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics' *Current Population Reports* series.

[c]No general population estimates are available for male fertility in the United States. The 66% figure is taken from the 1991 National Child Development Study in England (Ferri, 1993).

[d]Prisoners includes inmates in state and federal correctional facilities. Total supervision includes prison inmates, parolees, probationers, and jail inmates.

escape detection and many who are arrested or convicted are never incarcerated. To what extent does deviant activity co-vary with adult life course transitions in the *general* population? Age-graded transition norms and cultural definitions of appropriate behavior appear to govern desistance patterns in the general population. If a person smokes marijuana or shoplifts at age 16, the behavior is more normative in both a statistical and a sociological sense than identical conduct at the age of 30 or 40.

Table 15-2 presents some descriptive data on adult deviance and life course markers taken from the Youth Development Study (YDS) (e.g., see Mortimer & Kirkpatrick Johnson,

TABLE 15-2. Deviant Behavior and Life Course Markers of Youth Development Study Respondents, Males and Females Aged 25–26 in 1999

Variables	Number of cases	Drunk driving	Shop-lifting	Simple assault
Males				
Education markers				
Less than associate's degree	133	40.2	7.5	25.6***
Attained associate's degree	182	39.6	4.4	13.3
Employment markers				
Not full-time employed	44	25.0**	11.4*	18.1
Full-time employed	270	42.4	4.8	18.6
Family markers				
Not married	206	49.9***	6.8*	23.4***
Married	109	28.4	2.7	8.3
No children	206	40.8	5.3	17.5
Children	108	38.9	6.5	20.4
Combined transitions				
Unmarried or not full-time	217	44.2**	6.9	22.6**
Married full-time workers	99	30.3	3.0	9.1
Females				
Education markers				
Less than associate's degree	157	28.9	5.7	15.3**
Attained associate's degree	264	28.0	3.4	3.8
Employment markers				
Not full-time employed	88	23.9	7.9	12.4
Full-time employed	335	29.6	3.3	6.8
Family markers				
Not married	271	33.2**	4.4	9.5
Married	152	19.7	4.0	5.3
No children	226	32.3**	2.6*	2.6**
Children	197	23.9	6.0	14.1
Combined transitions				
Unmarried or not full-time	307	31.3**	4.2	9.1
Married full-time workers	120	20.8	4.2	5.0

*Significant at 0.10 level, **significant at 0.05 level, ***significant at 0.01 level (two-tailed tests).

1999), a prospective longitudinal investigation of 1,000 young adults who had been students in St. Paul (Minnesota) public schools. In contrast to Table 15-1, Table 15-2 compares offenders and non-offenders based on self-reported questionnaire data, rather than official statistics. These data therefore allow us to test whether those who have attained a certain marker are more or less likely to commit certain deviant acts as adults. The YDS data on life course markers and deviant behaviors were collected in the eleventh wave of the study in 1999, when most participants were 25 or 26 years old. We consider three types of self-reported deviance: driving while intoxicated, shoplifting, and simple assault. In national arrest data, shoplifting and simple assault rates rise to a sharp peak in the mid to late teens, with most offenders desisting in late adolescence (U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1999). Arrests for driving while intoxicated peak at age 21 and decline much more slowly throughout the twenties and thirties. In the YDS data, a small but non-trivial proportion of young adults reported engaging in each of these activities within the past year. Data for men

and women are presented separately because the meaning of each transition and its relationship to adult offending is likely to differ by sex.

Overall, these data show some association between attaining adult markers and committing deviance in adulthood, though not always in the expected negative direction. Only a handful of respondents had yet to attain their high school diploma or general educational development equivalency in this highly educated sample. Among both males and females in the study, those who had attained at least an associate's degree were significantly less likely to engage in simple assault within the past year than those who had not attained a postsecondary degree. Men who were working full-time were significantly *more* likely to report drunk driving and marginally less likely to report shoplifting relative to the small number of men who were not employed full-time. The positive association between automobile ownership and employment may be partially responsible for the drunk driving results, while the negative association between economic need and employment is likely to explain the shoplifting results.

Married men were less deviant than unmarried men on all three outcomes, although rates of drunk driving, shoplifting, and simple assault were equivalent for men with and without children. Among females, in contrast, those with children were significantly less likely to report drunk driving, but more likely to report shoplifting and simple assault. When the transitions are examined in combination, those who have both married and entered full-time employment report less drunk driving and simple assault. The latter finding suggests a potentially intriguing interaction: full-time employment alone may increase drunk driving, whereas full-time employment conditioned by marriage appears to reduce it.

Taken together, the descriptive data from the inmate surveys and the young adults in the YDS suggest a complex relationship between criminal behavior, official punishment, and life course transitions. The prison data show that officially defined offenders are likely to lag behind their contemporaries in terms of education, employment, and marriage. Rates of childbearing appear to be high among this group, though reliable comparative data are unavailable for the general population in the United States (see note *c* of Table 15-1). Data from the general community sample of young adults in the YDS suggest that some common forms of deviance are less prevalent among those who have attained certain markers of adult status, particularly marriage. Yet, for males in particular, having a full-time job or a child does not diminish the likelihood of violent or substance-related offenses, such as simple assault and drunk driving.

These illustrative data show how offending is related to life course markers at a single point in time, but can only hint at how life course transitions may affect the process of desistance from crime. Whether desistance constitutes a separate dimension of the multifaceted transition to adulthood depends, in part, on the particular definitions of deviance and desistance under consideration. If only those who have been incarcerated in a penitentiary are considered at risk of desisting from crime, then the pool of eligible desisters is a relatively small proportion of the adult population. Alternatively, if behaviors such as disorderly conduct, petty theft, and marijuana use constitute deviance, then the pool of eligible desisters is correspondingly larger. The next section of this chapter reviews general definitions of desistance and an emerging understanding of desistance as a life course process rather than a fixed state.

GENERAL DEFINITIONS OF DESISTANCE

Because conceptual and operational definitions of desistance vary across existing studies, it is difficult to draw empirical generalizations from the growing literature on desistance from

crime. In addition to considerations of theory and basic ontological assumptions, many definitions of desistance have been driven by the availability of data and empirical evidence. In every case, however, the relationship between age and crime is central. As Hirschi and Gottfredson (1983) noted most forcefully, individuals in most societies over most historical periods tend to commit less crime as they age, so distinguishing a process of desistance from simple aging can pose methodological and conceptual problems. Despite this difficulty, a substantial research literature has emerged to describe the life course transition of desistance from criminal behavior.

Perhaps the most influential and important study of crime over the life course, Sampson and Laub's (1993) *Crime in the making: Pathways and turning points through life*, defines "desisters" as those who had an official delinquent history as juveniles but no arrests as adults. To explain desistance, they look to turning points in the life course such as marriage or employment. Thus, while Sampson and Laub operationalized desistance as the presence or absence of an event (arrest), their conceptual model leaves room for life course processes that foster change over time. In the life history interviews included in *Crime in the making* and in subsequent work (Laub, Nagin, & Sampson, 1998), Laub, Sampson, and their colleagues have moved toward studying desistance as a process, with a focus on changing rates of offending.

Desistance as a Process

Our view of desistance as a separate dimension of the transition to adulthood is consistent with the idea that desistance is a process characterized by particular behavioral states or markers. We therefore conceptualize the process of desistance from crime as analogous to the gradual assumption of adult occupational and family roles. The state of desistance, in contrast, is analogous to discrete life course markers such as school completion. By this logic, the transition to adulthood may be viewed as a set of interrelated incremental processes that culminate in transiting these basic markers. Of course, reversals of transitional events may occur: those we classify as "desisters" may return to crime just as educational "completers" may return to school or those who have established an independent residence may return to live with parents.

More generally, criminologists have begun to consider desistance as the process leading to the cessation of criminal involvement, rather than as a discrete state of non-offending (see Sampson & Laub, this volume). Bushway, Piquero, Broidy, Cauffman, and Mazerolle (2001) follow Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) in conceptualizing "criminality" as an individual propensity to offend. In contrast to Gottfredson and Hirschi's contention that criminality is a *stable* trait, however, Bushway et al. (2001) hold that this propensity varies with age. In choosing a dynamic rather than a static conception of desistance, Bushway et al. argue that statistical models of desistance should capture changes in the rate of offending rather than offending itself.

Dynamic models are consistent with Maruna's (2001) understanding of desistance, although that author emphasizes social relationships as well as individual behavior. Based on his intensive interviews with offenders, Maruna (2001) contends that the transition out of crime involves both a change in the way an individual interacts with society and an individual identity shift. Desistance is thus a social process that ultimately results in the cessation of criminal activity. Although Maruna (2001) is agnostic about whether researchers can actually identify people who are in the process of desisting, his working definition is based on a respondent's ability to avoid criminal activity for at least 1 year.

Shover (1996) adopts a similar approach to desistance in studying the careers of persistent thieves. Shover posits that a combination of individual social–psychological processes and the development of conventional social bonds strengthen offenders' resolve to abandon crime. Again, desistance is viewed as a process, defined as "voluntary termination of serious criminal participation" (Shover, 1996, p. 121), rather than a discrete event.

Shover's (1996) sophisticated understanding of desistance as a process illuminates some of the most vexing areas for further study of crime over the life course and highlight some of the basic dilemmas in studying the process of desistance. For example, should we count among the desisters those who cease drug use when they are incarcerated? What about those who never rise to the level of serious criminal involvement or offenders who had committed serious crimes in the past who continue to commit petty crimes? We next consider five distinctions that may help refine conceptions of desistance from crime and deviance in relation to other life course transitions.

IMPORTANT DISTINCTIONS

Desistance from What? Specific versus General Desistance

Criminologists have long noted that offenders tend to be versatile in their offending, rather than narrow specialists in a particular type of crime (Hindelang, 1981). Despite the generality of deviant behavior in the adolescent stage of the life course, the rate and causes of desistance are likely to differ across offense types. In fact, Piquero, Paternoster, Mazerolle, Brame, and Dean (1999) report some evidence of increasing offense specialization as offenders age. Some have suggested that the process of desistance among drug offenders or sex offenders may differ from more general desistance processes. In a small sample of sex offenders on probation, for example, Kruttschnitt, Uggen, and Shelton (2000) found few differences in the predictors of desistance from sex crimes versus other offense types, though age effects on desistance from sex crimes appeared to be significantly weaker than age effects on desistance from other types of crime. In a similar study of domestic violence offenders, Eckberg (2001) reports significant differences in the effects of age and probation supervision level on violent and non-violent arrests and on new domestic violence cases versus other violent arrests.

"Status offenses," or delinquent acts that would be legal if committed by adults, pose a paradox in life course research. In addition to the legal status of a particular behavior, age-graded transition norms and cultural definitions of appropriate behavior define what is normative and what is deviant at particular life cycle stages. In the contemporary United States, for example, alcohol use is generally considered illegal and deviant at age 10, illegal yet normative at age 18, and legal and normative at age 21 (McMorris & Uggen, 2000).

Desistance researchers are generally less concerned with status offenses than with more serious violations of the criminal code. In our view, however, the simple existence of status offenses—age-graded standards of deviant and conforming behavior—underscores how desistance is bound up with the multifaceted transition to adulthood. Once an individual reaches the legal drinking age, for example, claims to adult status may be undermined by binge drinking but not by moderate alcohol use. The desistance process involved in the cessation of binge drinking is therefore likely to differ from the desistance process involved in a culturally approved behavior such as moderate drinking. The latter activity is not considered deviant, in part, because it is consistent with other adult roles in the contemporary United States.

Recent scholarship offers the potential to link desistance from crime with analogous behaviors that are not illegal, such as alcohol use. Most studies find that even moderate drinking declines with age (Fillmore, Hartka, Johnstone, Leino, Motoyoshi, & Temple, 1991), although distinct trajectories of binge drinking have been identified as subjects pass from late adolescence to early adulthood (Schulenberg, O'Malley, Bachman, Wadsworth, & Johnston, 1995). In general, however, studies of desistance from substance use are quite consistent with studies of desistance from criminal behavior: the assumption of adult roles alters social interactions and belief patterns that produce a steady decline in legal and illegal substance use in young adulthood (Bachman, O'Malley, Schulenberg, Johnston, Bryant, & Merline, 2002). Although empirical research on desistance from analogous phenomena is rarely linked to desistance from criminal offending, it is likely that the same principles underlying desistance research on crime and substance use hold for a wide range of deviant role exits, such as homelessness, welfare receipt, eating disorders, certain sexual activities, and non-traditional careers (Uggen & Piliavin, 1998).

Offending Rates and Trajectories

Apart from the particular mix of activities in which they engage, offenders may also be distinguished by their rate of criminal activity and the onset and duration of their criminal careers (Nagin, Farrington, & Moffitt, 1995; Nagin & Land, 1993). In this line of research, desistance patterns help to identify distinctive trajectories when considered in combination with the age of onset and the frequency of offending. For example, members of a "late onset" group begin offending and desist later in life than other youth (D'Unger, Land, & McCall, 1998). Groups such as "high-rate chronics," "adolescent-limiteds," and "low-rate chronics" also tend to differ on characteristics such as truancy, peer popularity, and intelligence (Nagin & Land, 1993). Although age- or trajectory-specific determinants of desistance have yet to be consistently identified, it is likely that desistance patterns are a function of career length and intensity as well as characteristics such as age and offense mix.

Official Desistance versus Behavioral Desistance

When desistance is measured by contact with the criminal justice system rather than by individual self-reports, individuals generally appear to desist at an earlier age. This pattern is due in part to the differing legal standards for juveniles and adults. Therefore, part of the variation in arrest rates is a function of the age-graded penalties in the criminal code. Uggen and Kruttschnitt (1998) distinguish between official desistance, measured by arrest, and behavioral desistance, measured by self-reported offending. They attribute the greater gender differences in official desistance than behavioral desistance to criminal justice practitioners' sex-typed responses to the social positions of male and female offenders. For example, the effects of criminal history on behavioral desistance are virtually identical for men and women, but its effects on official desistance are significantly larger for women than for men.

Discrepancies between self-reported and official data may also undercut efforts to understand group differences in the desistance process, either through biases in enforcement or differential reporting. If police apply differential enforcement standards by race, geographic area, or historical period, then arrest-based desistance indicators are problematic if used to make comparisons across these groups, areas, or periods (e.g., see Elliott, 1995).

Unfortunately, self-reported offending data are subject to similar problems because systematic response biases may also vary across groups and with the shifting social acceptability of a behavior over place and time. If response biases are not uniform across different life course stages (and there is some evidence that this is the case [Geerken, 1994]), a distorted picture of offending trajectories and the desistance process is likely to emerge.

Levels and Thresholds—What Constitutes Desistance?

One practical problem in measuring desistance is the level or threshold of behavior that would constitute a new offense and remove individuals from a state of desistance. In research using official outcomes, the level of scrutiny varies with the form of correctional supervision. For example, a probationer in an intensive supervised probation (ISP) program has much greater opportunity to commit a technical violation than other probationers. A RAND study (Turner, Petersilia, & Piper-Deschenes, 1992) showed that ISP participants had more technical violations (primarily for drug use) relative to traditional probationers and parolees and are more likely to be returned to prison. In such cases, the putative desistance of the regular probation group may be a function of the lesser degree of scrutiny, rather than changing behavior patterns. More generally, Gottfredson, Mitchell-Herzfeld, and Flanagan (1982) find that whether inmates are considered successes or failures (whether they desist or fail to desist from crime) depends largely on the criteria used to assess desistance and recidivism.

Each of these practical distinctions in defining and measuring desistance—what sorts of crimes to consider, how to model desistance among different types of offenders, whether to examine official data or self-reported data, and the level of deviance necessary to trip a desistance switch—implies different research design considerations. Perhaps more importantly, such considerations must be driven by the particular theories or conceptual models thought to govern the desistance process.

LIFE COURSE THEORIES OF DESISTANCE FROM CRIME

Various theories have been developed to explain the life course transition away from criminal behavior. In our view, the most compelling explanations provide a parsimonious explanation of the relationship between criminal behavior and the passage through various life course markers in the transition to adulthood.

Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) Propensity Theory

Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) theory of self-control emphasizes person-specific differences in the propensity to commit criminal behavior, but a direct effect of age on crime across all individuals. They argue that the age distribution of crime is invariant across a broad range of social conditions and cannot be accounted for by any variable or combination of variables currently available to criminologists. Since the age effect is constant and need not be explained, simple aging rather than entry into adult roles causes diminished offending in adulthood. In this model, life course events such as entry into marriage or full-time employment are spurious correlates of desistance rather than true causes.

Moffitt's (1993) Age-Graded Typology

In contrast to Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990), Moffitt (1993) proposes a developmental life course theory based on a typology of two distinct classes, adolescent-limited offenders and life course-persistent offenders. The two are characterized by different precursors to and rates of involvement in antisocial behavior. Whereas the life course-persistent group is characterized by a small number of early and persistent offenders who maintain involvement in crime throughout their lives, the adolescent-limited group is a much larger class with little history of childhood antisocial behavior and little likelihood of antisocial behavior in adulthood. Life course-persistent offenders develop both *cumulative* and *contemporary* disadvantages relative to their peers through a series of disrupted relationships, attachments, and academic failures. Over time, these disadvantages and their antisocial behavior afford them ever-narrowing options to desist from crime. In contrast, adolescent-limited offenders are not compromised by such disadvantages and have a greater repertoire of behavioral options available to them. They recognize the negative consequences of crime, as well as the diminishing rewards and increasing costs of crime as they age. Adolescent-limited offenders are thus well situated to desist from crime in response to changing life circumstances.

In our view, Moffitt's (1993) adolescent-limited group exemplifies the notion of desistance as part of the transition to adulthood. Life course-persistent offenders, in contrast, are likely to be much more severely off-time relative to their birth cohort with more tenuous claims to adult status.

Sampson and Laub's Age-Graded Informal Social Control Theory

Sampson and Laub's (1993) age-graded theory of informal social control is currently the dominant sociological theory in life course criminology. While acknowledging that crime is due in part to individual propensities, Sampson and Laub show that adult bonds to conventional institutions play a causal role in the desistance process. As people enter marriage and full-time employment, they form adult social bonds that hasten desistance from crime and deviance independent of the aging process. For Sampson and Laub, the life events themselves are less important than the informal social controls and social capital that generally accompany these events. As individuals gain social capital in interaction with conventional others, they are more responsive to informal social controls that engender desistance from deviant activities. Sampson and Laub thus emphasize good marriages or stable employment rather than family formation or employment markers in themselves.

Symbolic Interactionist Theories of Deviance over the Life Course

Matsueda and Heimer's (1997) symbolic interactionist life course theory offers a social–psychological explanation of desistance in the transition to adulthood. The interactionist model holds that one's self-concept as deviant or conforming is developed through role-taking processes and social interaction. To explain changes in offending with age, symbolic interactionists look to the different deviant and conforming roles that individuals are likely to take at each life course stage—the "socially recognized and meaningful categories of persons" it is possible to be at a particular age (Cohen, 1965, p. 12). The choice of roles in a given situation is the product of the relative salience of deviant or law-abiding identities, which, in turn, are functions of social relationships and role commitments.

Adult work and family roles are again critical in explaining desistance from crime. Commitment to work roles (as co-worker, supervisor, or employee) and family roles (as spouse or parent) is linked to desistance from deviant roles, although precocious or off-time events such as teenage pregnancy may solidify already marginalized identities. Symbolic interactionists thus explain the life course transition away from crime through the adoption of work and family roles, the changing identity that accompanies these new roles, and the stabilization of this identity through role commitments.

Hagan's Theory of Criminal Embeddedness

Hagan's (1991, 1993) model of crime and desistance over the life course is linked to stratification processes in the larger society. Hagan's (1993) theory of criminal embeddedness highlights the stratified and cumulative nature of criminal involvement and its relationship to life course transitions. For example, Hagan (1991) finds that identification with a subculture of delinquency reduces early adult occupational attainment for males from working-class origins, but not for males from non-working-class origins. For males from non-working-class backgrounds, identification with a "party subculture" that engages in substance abuse and minor delinquency actually has a net positive effect on attainment, once its effect on educational performance is removed. Hagan explains this finding by suggesting that the party subculture helps socialize adolescents to the activities and networks that drive later workplace advancement.

Hagan contends that early criminal involvement and associations with delinquent peers reduce the likelihood of later legitimate adult employment. Involvement in criminal behavior "embeds" youth within a different life course trajectory than youths not involved in crime. Young people who repeatedly engage in delinquent activity tend to associate with others who participate in illicit activity. This process isolates delinquents from those who might provide access to legitimate employment or educational success. These limited behavioral options have far-reaching implications across the life course, such as decreased levels of employment and status attainment, which help to explain why some individuals persist in criminal activities while others desist. While Sampson and Laub (1993) emphasize the malleability of early criminal trajectories, Hagan's model suggests that early delinquency is likely to have more sustained socioeconomic effects throughout the adult life course.

SOCIAL INTEGRATION AND REINTEGRATION ACROSS THREE DOMAINS

Although theories of informal social control, symbolic interactionism, and criminal embeddedness emphasize different mechanisms connecting desistance with other life course transitions, we believe that they are all compatible with the notion of desistance from deviant activities as a facet of the transition to adulthood. Moreover, they each conceptualize desistance in terms of social integration or reintegration. People generally cease or moderate their criminal and deviant behavior as they become more integrated or reintegrated into other domains of social life, suggesting that desistance is a consequence of becoming an adult. In addition, desisting from adolescent deviant activities facilitates integration into work, family, and community life. In our view, desistance is thus both a cause and consequence of transiting the other markers of adulthood. What are the changing life circumstances that accompany and engender desistance from crime? We conceptualize integration as occurring across three

primary domains: socioeconomic, familial, and civic (Uggen et al., 2002; Uggen, Thompson, & Manza, 2000).

Socioeconomic Reintegration

Socioeconomic reintegration refers to labor force participation and educational and occupational attainment. A large research literature suggests that job stability (e.g., Sampson & Laub, 1990, 1993) and job quality (e.g., Uggen, 1999) are tied to desistance from crime, although it is very difficult in such non-experimental studies to separate "job effects" from the processes of selection that guide persons into jobs of varying quality (Uggen & Staff, 2001). Experimental evidence suggests that the effect of publicly subsidized employment on crime may be age graded. One study found that offenders older than 26 were significantly more likely to desist from crime when provided a minimal work opportunity, but that younger offenders provided such jobs were no more likely to desist than a control group (Uggen, 2000). In general, subsidized job programs are less salient to youthful offenders and less successful among youth in the general population as well (Orr, Bloom, Bell, Doolittle, Lin, & Cave 1995), although the residential Job Corps program may provide an important exception (Mallar, Kerachsky, Thornton, & Long, 1982).

Among official correctional populations, the problem of reintegrating large numbers of criminal offenders into the labor force—and providing employers with needed workers in a tight labor market—is increasingly attracting policy attention. For example, some have argued that the conviction records of some misdemeanants and non-violent felons should be sealed in an effort to enhance the employability of these groups (Lueck, 2000). At the same time, a new wave of public and private ventures has emerged since the late 1990s to connect offenders and ex-offenders with employers (Buck, 2000). Although the employment opportunities of convicted felons are severely limited relative to those in the general population, even marginal employment fosters a sense of adult participation in society as a productive citizen (Uggen et al., 2002).

Familial Reintegration

Socioeconomic reintegration is intimately tied to the problem of reintegrating offenders into their families. The family of origin has long been considered among the most important factors in the etiology of juvenile delinquency (Hirschi, 1969). While the initial causes of crime and the causes of desistance are likely to differ (e.g., see Uggen & Piliavin, 1998), the family also plays a pivotal role in the desistance process. In the latter case, however, the assumption and management of the adult family roles of spouse and parent are most significant.

As detailed in Table 15-1, most prison inmates are unmarried fathers, though the number of mothers in prison has risen steadily in recent years. Although marriage in itself is not consistently related to desistance from crime, the quality of the marital union has been shown to affect the likelihood of desistance in both qualitative (Shover, 1996) and quantitative work (Laub et al., 1998). Again, however, it is difficult to disentangle marital quality from highly selective assortative mating processes.

The relation between childbearing and desistance may depend on the gender of the offender. One study found that female offenders with children are more likely to self-report desistance than those without children, as well as a significant gender difference in the effects

of children on desistance (Uggen & Kruttschnitt, 1998). It remains unclear whether the effect of children is due to informal social controls, the fear of losing custody, or changes in self-concept that accompany the parent role (Uggen et al., 2002). The issue of familial reintegration is especially salient, however, in light of rising rates of incarceration and the effect of parental convictions on their children's criminality (Hagan, 1993). The U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics (2000b) estimates that the number of minor children with at least one parent in a state or federal prison rose from 1 million to 1.5 million between 1991 and 1999. Overall, about 2% of all children and more than 7% of African American children currently have an incarcerated parent. Many more have parents who are ex-prisoners or felons currently serving parole or probation sentences. While family reintegration offers important benefits for offenders, it is problematic from the perspective of children if their parents remain active in crime or substance use. Reintegration programs must therefore balance the rights and interests of parents, children, and society in aiding offenders to assume or resume their family roles.

Civic Reintegration

Although a large research literature has focused on work or marriage as potential turning points in the life course of criminal offenders, the subject of reintegration into community life and civic participation has received comparatively little attention. Civic reintegration represents a third domain in which increased social participation may alter patterns of desistance. Following Maruna's contention that desistance is only possible when ex-offenders "develop a coherent prosocial identity for themselves" (2001, p. 7), Uggen et al. (2002) suggest that the self-concept as a deviant or conforming citizen is the principal mechanism linking adult role transition and desistance. When criminologists refer to "citizens" they generally use the term in opposition to criminal offenders, placing criminals on one side of the street and law-abiding community residents on the other. Yet Uggen et al. find that felons think of *themselves* as citizens, assuming roles as taxpayers, homeowners, volunteers, and voters.

In both officially defined correctional populations and in the general population, civic participation in the form of volunteerism and membership in community groups is likely to co-vary with desistance patterns. Among correctional populations, a 1987 law in Israel permitted courts to commute short prison sentences for community service work (Nirel, Landau, Sebba, & Sagiv, 1997). After adjusting for the non-random selection into service work with a propensity score methodology, Nirel et al. (1997) report significantly lower odds of recidivism (and correspondingly higher odds of desistance) among service workers relative to offenders not assigned to service work. Although few studies of community service and desistance have been conducted within the general population, at least one investigation finds a robust negative relationship between volunteer work and arrest in late adolescence and young adulthood (Uggen & Janikula, 1999).

Civic engagement may also take the form of voting or other forms of political participation (Uggen & Manza, 2000). Citizenship roles may seem peripheral relative to socioeconomic and family roles, yet prisoners and other correctional populations are ultimately defined in terms of their legal relationship with the state and their separation from their fellow citizens. As part of the desistance process, prisoners and ex-prisoners often adopt a language of civic mindedness and make efforts to connect with the lives of their communities (Maruna, 2001; Uggen et al., 2002). As Ernest Thomas, an ex-offender who was disenfranchised because of a felony conviction stated, "They say I'm a citizen, but I'm not a citizen. A citizen

has a right to vote" (Davis, 2001). If persons enmeshed in interdependent social relations are less likely to reoffend, as informal social control theories suggest, then civic reintegration merits further investigation in desistance research.

DESISTANCE AND THE LIFE COURSE IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

Most of the desistance research cited in this chapter has been drawn from studies of the United States. The need for comparative analysis stems from potential U.S. exceptionalism with regard to the timing of life course transitions, deviant behavior, and punishment policies. Moreover, comparative analysis can help to determine how macro-level structures shape the desistance process. For example, the United States utilizes the penal system at rates far higher than other advanced Western societies (Mauer, 1999), with an incarceration rate that exceeds Germany's rate by a factor of seven and Japan's rate by a factor of 17. Although U.S. rates of criminal victimization have been relatively stable over the period, the number of state and federal prisoners has grown by over 700% in the past three decades, from 196,429 in 1970 to 1,381,892 in 2000 (U.S. Department of Justice, 1973, p. 350; U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2001b, p. 1). This creates disproportionately large officially defined deviant populations in the United States. Yet the United States lacks well-defined institutional mechanisms for the socioeconomic, familial, and civic reintegration of juvenile and adult offenders (Braithwaite, 1989).

With regard to socioeconomic transitions, U.S. labor markets are comparatively stable when contrasted with the dramatic rise in U.S. imprisonment rates (Savelsberg, 1994; Western & Beckett, 1999). Despite this, young offenders have become so socially isolated and economically marginal that they are no longer considered productive by employers (Holzer, 2000). As the U.S. industrial mix has shifted in the postwar era, the demand for low-skill workers has fallen. Thus, a postindustrial skill mismatch may have rendered an increasingly large segment of potential desisters "unemployable" (and "unmarriageable" as well) even in tight labor markets. In contrast, the transition of youth into the labor market is much more orderly in countries such as Germany and in Japan, which may buffer potential skill mismatches and employer reluctance to hire criminal offenders (Harada, 1995; Krymkowski, 1991; Schumann, 1995). Unfortunately, there is little direct comparative evidence on socioeconomic reintegration of criminal offenders, in part because the proportion of the population affected is very small in other industrialized nations.

Culturally specific age-graded role expectations (Braithwaite, 1989) and distinctive institutional structures, such as those guiding the school-to-work transition, are likely to engender different desistance patterns in different societies. For example, Japan has lower rates of crime and a higher rate of juvenile offenses among total offenses than the United States, but an earlier average age of desistance (Harada, 1995). Perhaps the more rationalized school-to-work transition fosters early desistance just as it facilitates the integration of Japanese youth into adult society more generally (Rosenbaum, Kariya, Settersten, & Maier, 1990).

In sum, the United States appears to be exceptional for both the size of its officially defined deviant populations and the lack of institutional mechanisms for socioeconomic and civic reintegration at pivotal life course stages. Further comparative analysis is needed to qualify, extend, or refine generalizations based on the American case.

INTERVENTIONS

In addition to cross-national or comparative work, further study of social policy interventions is likely to inform knowledge of the relationship between life course transitions and desistance. In particular, the study of age-by-correctional treatment interactions can help determine whether the same set of causal factors are operative at different life course stages. For policy purposes, such research can identify those most amenable to a given program. For scientific purposes, such research can show how the transition out of crime is linked to other life course processes.

For example, research on socioeconomic reintegration suggests that older offenders who are given jobs are more likely to desist from crime than those of comparable age who were not provided such opportunities (Uggen, 2000), but that younger offenders may be less amenable to subsidized employment programs. With regard to familial or civic reintegration, a similar strategy could be undertaken by studying the effectiveness of randomized family support or community service interventions (e.g., see Nirel et al., 1997). In the general population, coupling self-reported offending data with analysis of social interventions such as the G.I. Bill (Sampson & Laub, 1996), changes in tax policy, or public assistance guidelines would help illuminate the desistance process among those outside the criminal justice system.

SUMMARY

Much of the extant literature on crime and desistance over the life course has been concerned with how the transition to adult roles affects criminal behavior (Sampson & Laub, 1990) or how criminal behavior affects the transition to adult roles (Hagan, 1991). Throughout this chapter we have explored a slightly different question: whether desistance from minor delinquency and crime itself constitutes a separate and important dimension of the multifaceted transition to adulthood.

We began by presenting some basic illustrative data to show how officially defined deviants are "off-time" with respect to the basic socioeconomic and familial markers of adult status. After cross-tabulating similar markers with three forms of common deviance among a general community sample of young adults, we noted that adult offending tends to co-vary with the occurrence of certain adult transitions. We then reviewed some of the practical design considerations involved in measuring desistance at different life course stages as well as existing theories of crime and desistance over the life course.

The relationship between desistance from crime and other adult role transitions has been difficult to determine with certainty. In most research settings, social scientists or correctional administrators cannot randomly assign life course transitions such as marriage or employment to gauge their effects on criminal behavior. Therefore, when these transitions occur it is virtually impossible to tell whether they are causes or correlates of changes in offending. Some suggest that the apparent effects of work or marriage are really due to pre-existing amenability to change, or "person effects" that drive people to select into these adult roles (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). For example, those most likely to desist are also likely to self-select into higher quality jobs. In contrast, others have suggested that the role transitions actually cause desistance from crime. Today, an increasing body of empirical evidence suggests there is truth in both positions—that the amenability of offenders that leads them to select into these statuses is accentuated by interaction in these roles. As individuals develop adult socioeconomic, familial, and civic role commitments, the salience of their identities as law-abiding

citizens rises and the salience of their identities as rule violators recedes. With this gradual shift during the transition to adulthood, the actions of rule violators begin to meet the expectations of the adult citizen role more consistently and they desist from crime.

Much of the empirical research on desistance from crime has been productively organized around the domains of work and family or problems of socioeconomic and familial reintegration. We suggest that consideration of a third domain, civic reintegration, may help to identify forms of community involvement and civic participation that engender desistance among both officially defined correctional populations and the much larger population of adolescents and young adults who engage in criminal and deviant behaviors (e.g., see Uggen et al., 2000).

Although we present some basic descriptive information showing the timing of life course markers and deviant behavior, we have yet to test the idea of desistance as a separate dimension of the transition to adulthood. To subject such ideas to empirical testing, we conclude on a programmatic note. In particular, we argue for greater attention to variations in desistance patterns across space and time and to the life course implications of social policy experiments and quasi-experiments that may hasten the desistance process.

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