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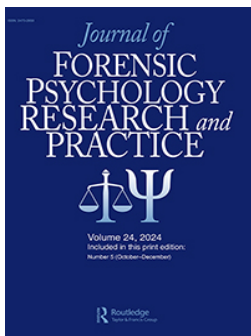
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## Exploring Factors Related to the Process of Desistance from Crime: A Qualitative Study of Females in the UK

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### ABSTRACT

Less is known about the process of desistance from crime for females within the criminal justice system. The current study explored the views and experiences in a sample of adult female offenders in the UK. Ten women took part in semi-structured interviews. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The following themes were identified: Skills and Attributes; Support; Purpose in Life; Risk Factors; and Consequences. The findings provide support for existing theories of desistance including cognitive transformation theory, social control and identity theory of desistance. The findings add to the growing evidence in the field of desistance from crime in female offenders.

### KEYWORDS

Desistance from crime; female offenders; theories of desistance

### Introduction

There is currently no consensus on a common definition of desistance from crime. Most researchers, however, acknowledge that desistance is a process whereby an individual disengages from offending behavior and that the process unfolds over time (Laub & Sampson, 2001; Maruna, 2001). Desistance from crime is considered to be a challenging process and may involve “stops” otherwise known as relapses (Farrall & Calverley, 2006). In essence, the term desistance is rooted in the notion that everyone is morally redeemable and that “Under a moral redeemability belief system, ‘criminality’ is not a permanent trait of individuals, but rather an adaptation to a person’s life circumstances that can be changed by altering those circumstances or self-understandings” (Maruna & Mann, 2019, p. 5).

The process of desistance from crime is multifaceted, with numerous theories offering diverse explanations as to why individuals discontinue offending behaviors. This section provides a brief overview of the principal theories of desistance, before continuing with the literature related specifically to female desistance from crime.

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Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) self control theory states that low self-control, stemming from poor parenting and socialization, leads to offending. They posited that if self-control is not developed by age eight, it is unlikely to improve significantly later. Thus, early life experiences, rather than later events like marriage or employment, largely determine the propensity to offend (Beaver et al., 2009; Higgins et al., 2009; Turner & Piquero, 2002). However, their theory has been said to lack an explanation as to why offenders cease offending, and other researchers have called the evidence base into question (Ezell & Cohen, 2004; Jo & Bouffard, 2014; Wolfe et al., 2016).

The social control theory developed by Hirschi (1969) proposed that an individual engages in offending behavior when their “bond” with society is weakened. The theory is based on four elements: attachment; commitment; involvement and beliefs. Empirical support for the theory is robust (Bouffard & Rice, 2011; W. Brown & Jennings, 2014; Morris et al., 2011). Recent studies have found that strengthening social bonds can reduce reoffending (Baker et al., 2018; Zavala & Perez, 2022).

Informal social control theory put forward by Laub and Sampson (2003) suggests that ties to family, education, and employment encourage desistance, especially starting in early adulthood. This theory is supported, particularly in the context of marriage and employment (Sampson et al., 2006; Skardhamar & Savolainen, 2014). However, it faces criticism regarding the impact of cultural and socio-economic factors (Abrams & Tam, 2018; DiPietro et al., 2018). Abrams and Tam (2018) found that abusive partners hindered women's desistance from crime. In contrast, DiPietro et al. (2018) found marriage supported desistance in socioeconomically disadvantaged black women.

Moffitt (1993) put forward the Dual Taxonomy of Offending in which offenders are categorized into life persisters and adolescent-limited. Life persisters (i.e., those who do not desist as they mature) may experience neurological issues and struggle with problem solving, while adolescent-limited (14–20 years of age) do not suffer from such issues and individuals desist and reintegrate into society. Subsequent research both supports and challenges this model, suggesting more nuanced offender types (Ezell & Cohen, 2005; Pękala et al., 2021; Sweeten et al., 2013; Van Hazebroek et al., 2019).

Hughes (1998) explored the concept of social capital in the context of desistance from crime. He identified “turning points” such as age, concern for children and fear of physical harm or imprisonment, which marked an end to offending. Laub and Sampson (2001) expanded on this, emphasizing family and employment as desistance factors. Kazemian (2007) argued that modern family structures, with more single parents and higher divorce rates, have diminished the traditional value of family ties. This change reduces the impact of family relationships on the desistance process in particular for female offenders. Williams et al. (2022) found that adolescents with less positive family social capital (e.g., parental supervision, time spent with parents, family

support) engaged in more delinquent activities. These findings suggest that early family interactions are crucial for building social capital and inhibiting offending behavior (Wright et al., 2001).

Giordano et al. (2002) proposed the theory of cognitive transformation, suggesting that while turning points are important for desistance, two cognitive transformations must occur first: offenders must be open and motivated to change, and they must perceive these turning points as significant. Subsequent cognitive changes, such as altering views on crime and forming a new self-identity, occur as a result of engaging with these turning points. Farrall and Maruna (2004) supported the theory by highlighting the interplay between an offender's schema and social structures. However, criticisms of Giordano et al. (2002) work suggest that it may not fully address societal or group dynamics (Burbank & Martins, 2010). Giordano et al. (2002) acknowledged this limitation, emphasizing that while motivation is crucial for desistance, it is not solely sufficient. They highlighted the importance of the social environment, particularly the stigma associated with being an offender. It was further argued that relationship instability in offenders' lives can perpetuate offending behavior. They suggested that roles like marriage could provide crucial social support for offenders' cognitive and emotional transformations, aiding in their journey toward desistance.

In Maruna's (2001) self-identity theory of desistance, he posited that desistance hinges on a shift in self-perception. Through interviews with both persisters and desisters, it was found that persisters often adopt a narrative of being a victim, attributing their offenses to environmental and social factors. In contrast, desisters embrace a theme of redemption; expressing confidence in their ability to control their present and future. This shift allows desisters to develop a positive self-concept, moving beyond their previous identities. Gadd and Farrall (2004) and Giordano et al. (2002) corroborated Maruna's findings. Maruna further suggested that involvement in community activities can enhance self-esteem and purpose which can facilitate desistance from crime.

Bushway and Paternoster (2013) proposed the identity theory of desistance whereby individuals maintain their "offender" identity when they perceive more benefits than costs in continuing criminal behavior. They may attribute consequences such as arrest and prison to "bad luck," which can reinforce continued engagement in offending behavior. The process of changing their offender identity occurs when they begin to recognize that their current criminal behavior could lead to undesired future consequences such as imprisonment. This provides the first step toward desistance. In order to maintain this, the individual creates a positive image of a law-abiding self. This prosocial identity motivates associations with a pro-social network (e.g., employment, friendships). Research has found support for the model (Bachman et al., 2016, Na et al., 2015); however, the model is relatively new, and more research is needed.

### ***Female desistance from crime***

Most studies examining desistance from crime have predominantly focussed on male offenders. However, more recently, studies have started to focus on female participants with a view to ensuring interventions can be tailored to their needs rather than assuming a “one-size-fits-all” approach. For instance, Kreager et al. (2010) found that the transition to motherhood is associated significantly with reductions in offending behavior, substance, and alcohol use even when controlling for pregnancy, marriage, sexual activity, and contraceptive use. Furthermore, Opsal (2012) found that employment played a key role in desistance from crime in females in particular. Those who desisted viewed themselves as active participants in the world of work and considered employment as a platform to legally meet their financial needs and to construct a pro-social replacement for themselves.

The findings are partially supported by Larroulet et al. (2023) who found that female offenders in Chile, who had employment arranged prior to their release were more likely to find employment as a stabilizing factor. Additionally, the authors highlighted barriers to employment faced by women in the sample, for example, having greater responsibility at home as a primary caregiver, having a criminal record and a lack of education. As such, the women struggled to obtain employment and if they did, their wages were low. In order to survive, they were more likely to engage in “under-the-table” working and resort to drug use and crime. Trotter et al. (2012) reported that when services for females are holistic, collaborative, understand the women’s perspective, focus on strengths, and the staff are reliable, desistance from crime was more likely to occur.

Recently, Rodermond et al. (2022) examined the impact of social capital, subjective changes, and resources on the desistance process of female ex-prisoners over a period of seven years in the Netherlands. Their study, involving over 1400 participants, found that marriage did not correlate with desistance, with women more likely to offend shortly after marrying. Employment had varied outcomes; structured jobs instigated positive changes, while those seeking quick money turned to illicit activities like prostitution and drug-related crimes. Stable housing emerged as a critical factor in desistance, whereas motherhood presented challenges such as financial instability and precarious caregiving situations. Despite the motivation to reform for their children, lacking practical support and essential resources like housing hindered women’s efforts to restructure their lives.

One of the largest literature reviews on desistance in female offenders was carried out by Rodermond et al. (2016). Their review focussed on whether, and if so, how, male-based theories of desistance apply to female offenders. The authors reviewed 44 studies. Twenty-seven studies consisted of males and females as participants, and on average, 41% of the total sample were women.

Seventeen studies focussed solely on female offenders. The findings suggested that motherhood (Broidy & Cauffman, 2006; Huebner et al., 2010; Kreager et al., 2010; Michalsen, 2013; Robbins et al., 2009), supportive relationships with partner, family, and friends (Broidy & Cauffman, 2006; Bui & Morash, 2010; Cobbina, 2010; Huebner et al., 2010; Leverentz, 2006; Trotter et al., 2012; Zurhold et al., 2011) and employment (Broidy & Cauffman, 2006; Cobbina, 2010; Huebner et al., 2010; Schram et al., 2006; Taylor, 2008) were important for female offenders. To a lesser extent, other factors also considered enabling the process of desistance were as follows: economic independence (McIvor et al., 2009; Taylor, 2008), the absence of drugs (McIvor et al., 2009; Schram et al., 2006; Taylor, 2008), education (Huebner et al., 2010; Schram et al., 2006; Taylor, 2008), fear of punishment (McIvor et al., 2009; Michalsen, 2013), and stable accommodation (Griffin & Armstrong, 2003; Taylor, 2008).

Whilst research in the area of female offending is growing, there remains a paucity of research on desistance in adult female offenders compared to research on their male counterparts. The current research will be the first of its kind on adult female desistance to be carried out solely in the UK. The aim of the research is to explore the views and experiences of a group of females within the criminal justice system in relation to psychological theories of desistance reviewed above. In addition, and related to the above aim, the study aims to explore views regarding elements of interventions aimed at addressing desistance.

The research and theories outlined above have highlighted the variety of factors that have been found to be associated with desistance from crime in females. Of the above theories of desistance, of particular interest within the context of the current study are as follows: informal social control theory (Laub & Sampson, 2003) due to the focus on marriage and employment; the concept of social capital (Hughes, 1998) whereby, for example, having a child could be considered a turning point; cognitive transformation (Giordano et al., 2002) which highlights the issue of motivation to change; and identity theory of desistance (Bushway & Paternoster, 2013) which considers the development of the pro-social identity. However, all theories will be explored in relation to the findings of the study.

## **Method**

The data were obtained from drama groups facilitated by Geese Theatre Company at community centers located in a large city in the UK. For context, prior to discussing the sample, procedure, interview schedule and analysis, an overview of the community centers and of the Geese Theatre Company will be provided.

### **Community centers**

Corston (2007) suggested that alternatives to custody should be used where possible due to prison being an expensive and an ineffective way of rehabilitating females who are not classified as serious offenders. Corston (2007) recommended that community sentences should be considered as a norm and there should be a development of a wider network of community provision for female offenders and those at risk of offending. As a result, there is now an emerging network of community provision as an alternative to custodial sentences. Some of the key centers for women in England are Together Women (Liverpool, Salford, Leeds, Doncaster and Bradford); WomenCentre (Dewsbury, Halifax and Huddersfield), The Women's Turnaround Project (Cardiff), and the Anawim Center (Midlands).

The Anawim Centre, for example, initially worked mainly with vulnerable women but following Corston's (2007) recommendations, the center now works closely with prisons, courts, and probation. Women referred to at Anawim have multiple complex needs including substance misuse, sexual exploitation, mental health, and offending behavior. Anawim supports women to develop life skills and to make positive choices. It also offers a range of treatment programs to provide alternatives to custodial sentences such as drug awareness, "stop and think" and "crisis" programs.

### **Geese Theatre Company**

Geese Theatre Company UK was established in 1987 under the franchise of Geese Theater USA. Geese Theatre Company is one of the first theater companies in the UK to specialize in working with offenders. The company works in prisons, forensic in-patient settings, young offenders' institutions, and probation centers and centers in the community. The company uses techniques such as role-play, imagery, masks, and metaphors to encourage offenders to examine their own offending behavior and to promote motivation to change and desist from offending. At the core of the company's interventions lie three fundamental principles: change, choice, and personal responsibility (Baim et al., 2002).

### **Sample**

The participants ranged between 23 and 52 years, with a mean age of 34.1 years. All participants had a forensic history. Half the sample had committed violent offenses ( $n = 5$ ), and half ( $n = 5$ ) had shoplifted. Three of the sample individuals had committed both a violent offense/s and shoplifting. Other offense types included driving violations ( $n = 1$ ), fraud ( $n = 1$ ), child-



neglect ( $n = 1$ ), drug-related ( $n = 1$ ) and arson ( $n = 1$ ). Six participants were Caucasian, three were African-Caribbean and one was South Asian. Seven participants were mothers and of these, four were single mothers. In terms of marital status, four were separated, four in a relationship, and two were single.

### **Recruitment**

Participants were recruited from drama groups (facilitated by Geese Theatre Company) across five locations; two community centers working exclusively with women, two substance misuse facilities supporting men and women, and one setting was run by Probation services. Referrals were made by their case workers or probation officers. The groups explored themes such as substance misuse, offending behavior, assertiveness skills, goal-setting, and coping skills. The length of each group varied based on funding, with an average of six sessions.

Group members were informed of the research by facilitators of the Geese Theatre group during the first session. Participants were advised that their participation was voluntary. The research was outlined and explained and the opportunity to ask questions was provided. Participants were also informed that the researcher would attend a set number of sessions allowing potential participants the opportunity to get to know the researcher and also to ask any questions related to the research and their participation. The researcher typically attended three sessions which were session two, session three or four (depending on the length of the program) and the last session. During the sessions, the role of the researcher was decided by the group facilitator. For example, the researcher took part in an ice-breaker exercise and a team-building exercise. Although the researcher did not actively join in with the exercises, the researcher supported the group members during tasks. During the last session, group members who wished to take part in the interviews approached the researcher.

Out of the 21 participants, 17 agreed to take part in the interviews. However, seven participants dropped out due to various reasons (e.g., mental health deterioration, emotional difficulties, relocation). A total of 10 participants took part in the study, a number considered adequate for the purposes of thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2019). All the participants had attended at least 50% of the group sessions (i.e., had attended four out of eight sessions). The 10 participants took part in semi-structured interviews. A copy of the interview schedule can be found in [Appendix A](#).

## **Procedure**

First, ethical approval was sought and granted by the University of Birmingham Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics Ethical Review Committee. This was subject to feedback from two independent reviewers as well as a panel. Following the recruitment procedure outlined above, those who expressed interest were provided with an information sheet and a consent form and dates and times for the interviews were discussed. The dates and times of the interviews were communicated to the participants' case workers via e-mail. Where a participant withdrew her consent for the interviews, the case workers contacted the researcher via e-mail or telephone. The interviews took place approximately four to 6 weeks following the end of the group. This time period was considered an appropriate follow-up period to allow participants to reflect on some of the areas later discussed in the interview.

Each interview lasted approximately 60–90 minutes in duration. Nine interviews were carried out in a private room at the center, and one participant was interviewed in her house. All of the interviews were audio recorded and then later transcribed verbatim by the researcher. The interviews were coded using NVivo software.

## **Interview schedule**

Interview questions were developed with a view to gaining an understanding of the experiences of the women in relation to their desistance from crime (See [Appendix A](#)). Examples of questions included “How have you found your contact with the (name of the centre)?,” “Do you remember the time when you felt content and in control?,” “Can you tell me what life was like prior to your contact with the Criminal Justice System?,” and “Where do you see yourself in the future?”

Interviews were conducted utilizing a semi-structured approach. Open-ended questions were used to encourage participants to speak in depth about their views and experiences. Prompt questions were used in order to gain more detail following responses given by the participants. After the interview, participants were given the option to receive a summary of the findings and were provided with the researcher's e-mail-address. Participants were informed that if they found recalling areas discussed in the interview distressing, they had the opportunity to have a debrief session with their case worker. The researcher was in contact with the participants' case workers and was available to discuss this if necessary.

**Data analysis**

The data were transcribed and subjected to thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2019). Thematic Analysis allows the researcher to examine themes from the data, addressing the primary research question. At first, interviews were transcribed using orthographic transcription (verbatim) to ensure a thorough transcription of spoken words (and other sounds) was achieved. Each interview was then read by the researcher at least twice for familiarization. The coding process then began and was completed across the data set. A search for the themes was conducted and then reviewed. After the review, the themes were defined and finalized in the write up stage. In line with more recent guidance from Braun et al. (2019), the research adopted a reflexive approach when coding and creating and defining themes. A combination of inductive and deductive approaches was employed. Research indicates that utilizing both methods in thematic analysis can enhance the depth of the overall analysis (Dawadi, 2021).

**Results**

The table below (Table 1) provides a summary of themes and subthemes occurring from thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with participants.

**Table 1.** Summary of themes and subthemes.

Theme	1. Skills and attributes	2. Support	3. Purpose in life	4. Risk factors	5. Consequences
Subtheme	1.1 Motivation to change (8)	2.1 Family (9) 2.2 Intimate relationships (3)	3.1 Education (4) 3.2 Job or Volunteer (9)	4.1 Antisocial peers/partners (7) 4.2 Boredom (9)	5.1 Impact on relationships(3) 5.2 Not meeting future goals (4)
	1.2 Positive outlook (5)	2.3 Positive peers (10)	3.3 Positive role model (4)	4.3 Urges to reoffend and instability (10)	5.3 Prison or Court (5)
	1.3 Relaxation and mindfulness (5)	2.4 Support from professionals (9)	3.4 Family and children (5)		
	1.4 Assertiveness and Confidence (5)	2.5 Spirituality (3)			
	1.5 Developing Skills through interventions (10)				
	1.6 Talking to others (5)				
	1.7 Knowledge of domestic violence (2)				

Numbers in brackets denote the number of participants who contributed to this sub-theme.

**Theme 1: skills and attributes**

This theme was concerned with the skills and attributes which participants reported as having helped them in desisting from crime. These were largely (with the exception of motivation) spoken of in reference to programs they had engaged with which had led to the development of said skills and

attributes. In short, reflection and knowledge gained in programs was felt to be beneficial.

### ***Motivation to change***

Participants commented that an internal drive led them to change their offending behavior. The majority spoke of feeling motivated to desist from crime. It was further suggested by one participant that this motivation had led them to recognize the importance of accepting the help of others.

I want help so I have to talk about it. So I made my mind up that I wasn't going to be ashamed to tell people. You know that I am here [centre] for shop-lifting, I'm here for this, I'm here for that and I find that if I feel that if I hide it all in, I wouldn't have got the help from the centre. (Participant 1)

### ***Positive outlook***

Many participants said that they felt they now had a positive, pro-social outlook; one in which they had hope for the future and felt they had the courage to achieve their goals. One of the participants reported "Yes, since engaging [at center] I feel I have more control over my life. . . I see my life in a positive, more positive aspect. . . I feel there are prospects out there for me now" (Participant 4).

Those who had engaged with the substance misuse programme also reported that programmes such as detox and 12 steps helped them combat their addiction and related offending behavior, giving them a more positive outlook on life. One participant commented that this was not an easy programme:

When I first come in [substance awareness group programme] and done. .like "say goodbye to our addiction." So it was like a grieving process. .erm. .my drink was my best friend inside me and it was like losing a part of me. .so it was a hard group. (Participant 10)

### ***Relaxation and Mindfulness***

Half of the participants spoke about the techniques of relaxation and mindfulness that they had learnt at the center. They believed the techniques have helped them manage cravings and urges associated with substance misuse and offending. One participant reported "I don't know but there's summat about it [mindfulness] that calms me down and I think coz the stress I am going through with the kids, it's something that calms me down" (Participant 8).

### ***Assertiveness and Confidence***

Participants reported that assertiveness training helped them to stand up for themselves against those who can have a negative influence on them which can

lead to manipulation and subsequent coercion to engage in offending behaviors. One of the participants said “I am learning not to be a people pleaser. . . learning to say ‘No’ which has been a hard thing” (Participant 10).

Furthermore, some participants made reference to an applied theater programme delivered by Geese Theatre Company (GTC) which they felt had increased their self-esteem and confidence which they felt would help in desistance from crime.

### *Developing skills through interventions*

Participants made reference to some programmes in terms of how they led them to reflect on their actions and thoughts, and how this helped them understand themselves, which in turn, impacted on their current thoughts and actions. Three participants made reference to a programme called “Stop and Think” which encourages individuals to consider their actions and reflect on their decision-making processes. They reported that the programme helped them to not act on their impulses. It was felt that not acting on impulses was necessary for desistance.

Furthermore, participants said counseling helped them to address trauma and other emotional difficulties relevant to their offending; helping them gain insight into the origin of their emotions: “Counseling you know for myself to understand my emotions, emotions that are damaged and having to be totally on my own again and erm. . . kind of find myself again to be fair to find out who I am” (Participant 7).

For those who were parents, it was reported that the parenting programme assisted them to reflect on their parenting style and how to make the relationship with their children better:

I know that with my elder child . . . when he has the games on or I am on the phone and I am pretending that I am listening to him and I am not even listening to him . . . it shown me things like little techniques of what I can do to improve the way that I care.  
(Participant 3)

### *Talking to others*

It was recognized that participants felt that talking more openly with others and seeking support from others, in particular from their peers those who have been through similar experiences as them, was important in their desistance from crime. For example, one of the participants stated:

Before I used to say “I’m alright, I’m alright” . . . . put on a front and put on a mask. . . being here [centre] I am more confident and I am beating the addiction and I am in recovery. I’m starting to understand it more as. . . the lie can’t hide a truth. . . so you know talking to someone like on my level that has been there where I am . . . I feel more comfortable and feel they are on my side. (Participant 10)

### ***Knowledge of domestic violence***

The programme taught participants how to keep themselves safe by picking up on the signs of manipulation, pressure, and inappropriate partners.

To be fair, the domestic violence course teaches you the signs of violence. Because when I got into that relationship, you know when you are getting abused and you know. . . . it doesn't mean that it is easy to walk away coz that's why people stay in domestic violent relationships . . . . I understand what it's [domestic violence course] trying to do. I was just doing it to try and understand a little bit more. . . . of his side of it. . . the mistakes. . . . I was trying to understand why he was like that (Participant 6).

### ***Theme 2: support***

Participants spoke of having a good support network – one in which they feel accepted. It was felt that this also gives them the strength to deal with difficult life situations.

#### ***Family***

Nearly all participants spoke about the importance of good relationships with family members. This was spoken of by one participant in relation to family being about to help with looking after children:

Some of them [women in groups] had no family ((pause)) I thought that was quite isolating I dunno how they will cope and I have mine . . . so I wanna make the best of my family now. . . and that means me supporting them and they supporting me.” (Participant 4)

#### ***Intimate relationships***

A small number of participants identified the importance of healthy and appropriate relationships featuring nonviolence, equality, and good communication. For example, one woman stated:

Obviously my partner I am with, you are a different type of person than he [ex-partner] is, he [current partner] wouldn't put me in that situation [domestic violence, offending] for me to be you know what I mean . . . to be back in the situation [domestic violence].” (Participant 9)

#### ***Positive peers***

All participants said that positive peer relationships (i.e., with peers who did not offend) deterred them from substance misuse and offending and gave them the appropriate emotional support they needed during a crisis. Some of these friends were made in the centers: “I see couple of group outside of here [center]. . . . There are no drugs or alcohol around seriously. . . I've made friends and they are good people that nice people so. . . I see. . .four people here and that's nice.” (Participant 6)

### ***Support from professionals***

Nearly all participants explained the importance of support they receive from professionals such as police, probation officer, doctors, case workers, and group facilitators. One participant highlighted that it was the belief that the professionals had in their ability to change that was instrumental in their desistance from crime:

If I hadn't been here [center] and people [staff] believed in me . . . I don't think I would have managed to do it. My probation officer was very comforting on the matter so I found that people really believe in me and that gives you a belief in yourself so it's a very accomplishing feeling. (Participant 1)

### ***Spirituality***

Some participants spoke of a sense of belonging that came from their faith. It was noted that the beliefs were incompatible with offending behavior and, as such, helped them desist. One participant stated "I know that if I start going to the church again, I will be on the straight road again." (Participant 2).

### ***Theme 3: purpose in life***

The theme refers to the development of a belief system that one's life has a positive meaning, i.e., a purpose in life. The narrative was around this purpose being able to improve an individual's well-being and, ultimately, promotes pro-social behavior.

### ***Education***

Some participants reported education gave them a clear direction for their future; a future which would not involve crime and one in which they could improve their prospects. One participant commented that education would actually be helpful in terms of learning more about herself: "I'm actually going to the university to study psychology . . . and work out my psychological problems and that's to why it [offending] was an addiction and things like that to understand it more" (Participant 1).

### ***Employment or volunteering***

Nearly all participants spoke of the benefit of having purpose from paid or unpaid work. Participants further spoke of work giving a focus and a structure to their day and, in some cases, helping them toward developing their future goals. For example, "I am doing my cleaning work now. I've done my five courses there [center] yeah. I completed all five yeah I've now changed from that to going to work" (Participant 5).

### ***Positive role model***

Some participants felt that part of their purpose in life was to help other people to learn from their mistakes and not get drawn into offending behavior. One spoke of their desire to work with addicts:

I'm looking to do peer-mentoring or coaching with addicts. If I have something that can really help them [addicts] and realise that...if they are younger and think that "she's done that all her life. She's older now and I don't want to be like that when I am older. I want to have my life." (Participant 10)

### ***Family and children***

Purpose was also found in repairing and maintaining family relationships; being a member of a family or being a parent was felt to be part of their purpose in life. One participant spoke of her desire to get her children back:

"start off having my kids on the weekends...and then eventually end up getting them back. I'm just in the middle of...erm...seeing me third. And save up some money, go abroad...just be normal again. A normal happy family" (Participant 5)

## ***Theme 4: risk factors***

Participant's spoke of factors which they felt would lead to them being more likely to re-offend. The women noted antisocial/pro-criminal peers, boredom, and instability (i.e., as a result of housing issues or difficulties in controlling urges for alcohol) as having a negative impact.

### ***Antisocial peers/partners***

Many participants recognized the negative impact that antisocial/pro-criminal peers or partners can have on their behavior. One further noted that, due to this recognition, they are cautious of new relationships:

I am not willing to let anyone in my life if they are not going to have my best interest. And most of these men that I am going to encounter are not going to be beneficial to me... I am not having that as an option in my life. (Participant 4)

### ***Boredom***

Nearly all participants said an empty routine can lead to urges and cravings for illicit substances and offending. One of the participants further commented that, due to this awareness, they try to keep occupied:

I just occupy myself...even if it was to come downstairs and mop the floor twice, vacuuming. I used to clean my room so if I get bored, I'd clean my room...I stay focussed... I go outside yeah, go on the computer, talk to my mum on the phone and occupy myself and seven in the evening Emmerdale is on ((laughs)) and I know that's



on and it keeps me occupied . . . then have a shower . . . put my pajamas on . . . and then it's time for bed (Participant 5)

### ***Urges to reoffend and instability***

Problems with housing and dependency on alcohol and illicit substances were identified as key sources of instability and this had the potential to lead to reoffending. One participant who had had an alcohol dependency spoke of how hard it was to successfully control urges to offend but that they were currently managing to resist:

Oh yeah even the corner shop . . . I can still see the alcohol but I'm like "nah" . . . I have to forget it. I look at it and realize where it took me last time . . . I have to think of me kids. Even when in the pub and see them [people] drinking and I'm like "nah. I don't want that life again. It's rubbish." (Participant 5)

### ***Theme 5: consequences***

Participants had considered the potential consequences of their actions. There was a narrative around this knowledge having a positive impact on the likelihood of leading a pro-social life.

#### ***Impact on relationships***

Some participants feared they would lose the respect and support of their family and peers if they offended again and/or went to court or prison. For example,

Like I said it's that fear of going to the jail . . . I've come so far and I wouldn't want to disappoint myself, I wouldn't want to disappoint my family, disappoint my peers knowing that they've put so much time into me to make me feel like it was all wasted. (Participant 1)

Participants with children also identified that losing their children as a result of reoffending would be detrimental to their lives. For instance, one of the participants commented:

the thought he [son] might get taken into the social services that will be a devastating blow to my system to know that I've haven't just let him down . . . no haven't just let myself down but also let him down (Participant 4)

#### ***Not meeting future goals***

Some participants said if they were to offend again, it would mean they would not be able to meet their pro-social goals. One participant reflected on her past and how her actions had led to having a criminal record which impacted the ability to get a job:

Wish I hadn't done it [offended] obviously. Not that I don't mind coming here [center] . . . I wouldn't be in this situation to have to come here all the time . . . obviously it's another thing on my record and plus I can't work in jobs with money. (Participant 3)

### ***Prison or court***

Half the participant's spoke of the thought of imprisonment for the first time or again instilling enough fear in them to stop them from re-offending. One participant commented "I'm not the sort of person who I don't think I've got the strength for it. I don't think that I could handle it to be honest" (Participant 3).

### **Discussion**

The findings from the current research suggest that, for the participants, skills and attributes, support from others, having a purpose in life, awareness of risk factors and fear of consequences were key factors for desistance. Interventions such as drama group, parenting groups, substance awareness, domestic violence, and having counseling were highlighted by participants as being useful in their journeys. Participants also identified the importance of practical skills such as assertiveness, relaxation, and mindfulness. Support from others consisted of family, peers, professionals, and spirituality. "Purpose in life" consisted of employment, education, and being a positive role model. Risk factors (i.e., factors which participants felt were barriers to desistance for them) were having an anti-social peer group, boredom and internal urges to reoffend. Finally, participants reported that the consequences associated with reoffending in terms of impact on relationships and not meeting goals, and the thought of returning to court or prison was a deterrent for future offending.

### ***Support from programme/intervention research***

Multiple studies point at the positive effects of drama therapy, particularly in terms of emotion regulation, self-esteem, social functioning, improve emotional and social skills, build social cohesion and foster prosocial behavior (Bourne et al., 2018; Doomen, 2018; Fancourt & Finn, 2019). Parenting effectiveness training, quality time spent with children, and guidance as to showing love and affection and how to nurture children have improved parent-child relationships (Martins et al., 2020).

Domestic violence programmes and substance misuse psychoeducational programmes have shown positive effects in supporting offenders' efforts to desist (Kiely et al., 2010). In a recent systematic review, McGovern et al. (2021) found that integrated psychosocial interventions, which combine parenting skills interventions with a substance use component, help reduce parents' alcohol and drug use. In a further literature review, Perry et al. (2019) concluded that when female offenders with a history of drug use, undertook Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) compared to therapeutic community programmes, a significant reduction in re-arrests was noted.

The benefits of attending counseling and psychological interventions for offenders with histories of trauma (resulting from adverse childhood experiences and being a victim of domestic violence) have been noted by Lynch et al. (2012). More recently, Molero-Zafra et al. (2022) found that Trauma focussed CBT and Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) to significantly reduce post-traumatic stress disorder and dissociative symptoms, behavioral problems, anger, depression, and anxiety in women, as well as improve their emotion regulation strategies and self-esteem. Research has found that mindfulness practice alone engages several cognitive mechanisms which result in the reduction in negative symptomology associated with psychopathology (Grzybowski & Brinthaupt, 2022; Hölzel et al., 2011).

It has been found that ending a relationship with an abusive partner and forming a new relationship described as supportive, and better than the previous one, contributes to desistance (Barry, 2010; Bui & Morash, 2010). Research has consistently shown that reentry into motherhood (following release) and caring for children is associated with reductions in offending (Bachman et al., 2016; Kreager et al., 2010; Liu & Miller, 2023). In regard to support from the professionals, Beck and McGinnis (2022) found that a supportive relationship with the probation officer gave individuals a new identity and distanced them from their offending behavior. The findings support the work of Bakken (2009) and Holm et al. (2023) that female offenders who reported regular attendance at religious services had reductions in levels of their offending.

In a recent literature research, M. Brown and Bloom (2018) concluded that higher education helps mitigate barriers to employment, especially when women start accessing the services whilst in prisons or afterward in the community. The findings support the work of Gunnison (2001) and Michalsen (2013) who found that a high perception of punishment increased the likelihood of termination of offending in a sample of female offenders.

### ***Linking findings with the theories of desistance***

Research findings support the following theories of desistance: cognitive transformation theory (Giordano et al., 2002), self-control (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990), self-identity theory (Maruna, 2001), identity theory of desistance (Bushway & Paternoster, 2013), social control (Hirschi, 1969), and social capital (Hughes, 1998).

The importance of motivation and willingness to change, as noted in the themes of skills and attributes, and purpose in life, support the cognitive transformation theory. The findings highlighted that the participants interviewed wanted to be someone better and to lead a worthwhile life. They felt motivated to change which helped them in their efforts to desist; indicating the role of the agency stemming from an internal motivation to desist.

Under the themes of skills and attributes and risk factors, the participants reported they had developed high self-control over their impulses to manage the cravings for alcohol and drugs and also offending behavior. They attributed this to engagement in psychological and social programmes where they learned the skills to develop impulse control.

The themes of support and purpose in life leads to the self-identity theory. Participants noted that positive peer influence (in particular from the other group members in the programmes) helped them find better ways to control their impulses and in order to fulfill their goals.

Similarly, when considering the identity theory of desistance, participants said their goal to “go straight” had become their primary identity, they could see the benefits of being a law-abiding citizen, and they developed self-belief and control over their future and present. They started to acquire and apply new skills to manage their urges and cravings, they started to see themselves more positively. Furthermore, volunteer work in the form of mentoring, improved their sense of self-worth, accomplishment, and purpose. Some participants saw themselves as a positive role model and in the role of a help-giver.

The themes of consequences and risk factors, support the principles of social control theory. The findings showed that as participants’ most recent contact with the Criminal Justice System had adverse consequences; they believed that this increased their motivation to change and to make efforts to desist from offending. As part of the process to desist, participants recognized the value of emotional bonds with their parents, peers, partners, and children which they wished to preserve. Thus, they were less likely to engage in offending as they did not want to put attachments with their children in particular at risk. Participants were committed to education, employment, and volunteer work as it had become part of their routine and gave them a structure. The benefits of this and the time and energy invested in these roles was felt to be far too important for them now to risk it by acting in a defiant manner which could lead to exclusion from these institutions. Furthermore, as employment allowed participants to pay their bills through legitimate means and they were able to manage boredom in a constructive manner, they no longer saw the need to deviate from rules set by these institutions.

The themes of purpose in life and consequences support the social capital theory. According to the theory, employment, concern for children and recent contact with the Criminal Justice System were the “turning points” for desistance for most of the participants. Employment helped participants to occupy their time in a meaningful manner. Furthermore, the recent contact with the Criminal Justice System induced fear for mothers who were separated from their children. The desire to be reunited with their children and/or to maintain

their children's return to the family home was a "turning point" to mark an end to their offending.

### ***Methodological strengths and limitations***

Ten interviews are considered adequate for a qualitative study using thematic analysis to draw out themes. The interviews utilized a semi-structured approach that provides a focal point from which to conduct and analyze the interviews, which is in line with the principles of thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2019). The sample is considered to be of a homogenous nature, as all participants had previously offended, had contact with the Criminal Justice System at some stage in their lives and were subject to rehabilitation in the community. Lastly, the current study is the first of its kind to be conducted solely in the UK. Earlier studies on the female offender population have been carried out in the USA, Australia, New Zealand, and Europe (Spain, Scotland, Germany, Austria, and Poland). The current research findings add to the field of desistance in female offenders which is currently lacking in the UK.

It is noted that selection bias may have had an impact on the findings of the study.; Individuals who were not engaging with the programmes and perhaps struggling to desist from crime may have been less likely to volunteer to take part in the study. In addition, this research may have been strengthened had there been a series of follow-up interviews over a long period of time with the participants which could explore whether the factors associated with desistance were stable overtime and whether the effects of the interventions were maintained. A further limitation of the study is that at the time of the interview, it was not possible to establish a mean time since the participants' last engagement in offending behavior which would have given an indication on the length of desistance achieved. Similarly, no information is available as to whether participants continued to desist from crime following the study. Access to such information would enhance knowledge of factors associated with maintaining desistance from crime.

### **Conclusions**

The study has added to the limited knowledge available in the field of desistance from crime in females. Factors such as maintaining contact with children, fear of prison/court (with reference to being separated from children), positive outlook on life, being a positive role-model and spirituality were found to be particularly important in women's process of desistance from crime. The findings supported the following existing theories of desistance: cognitive transformation, self-control, self-identity, identity theory of desistance, social control, and social capital. The importance of offender rehabilitation centers for women was one of the findings of the study. They provide a professional and a social support for

women outside of their immediate personal network of family and friends and play a vital role in female desistance from crime.

In short, although the findings of this qualitative study cannot be generalized to a wider population, the themes which emerged from interviews with participants are consistent with that of previous literature and theory. As such, they provide further support for centers regarding the need to provide funding and resources for females with previous involvement in the criminal justice system. Such support and intervention can, for some, be instrumental in desisting from crime.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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## Appendix A

### Interview Schedule

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**Main questions**

- (1) How have you found your contact with the . . . . . (name) Centre?
- (2) Do you remember the time when you felt content and in control?
- (3) Can you tell me what life was like prior to your contact with the Criminal Justice System?
- (4) What has been your experience of the Criminal Justice System?
- (5) Where do you see yourself in the future?

**Probing Questions**

- (1) Could you say something more about that?
  - (2) Can you give a more detailed description of what happened?
  - (3) Do you have further examples of this?
  - (4) Could you tell me more about your thinking on that?
  - (5) You mentioned . . . . What stands out in your mind about that?
  - (6) This is what I thought I heard . . . Did I understand you correctly?
  - (7) What makes you feel that way?
  - (8) You just told me about . . . . I'd also like to know about . . . .
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