ORIGINAL ARTICLE

A Social Support Theory of Desistance

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Abstract

Purpose Following Cullen's spirit when setting forth his version of social support theory, this article shows the value of social support as an organizing concept for life-course theory. Specifically, this article describes four different pathways through which social support matters for desistance. First, social support is a constitutive part of adults' social bonds that operate as resources that make change possible in individuals' lives. Second, social support can promote and help sustain a cognitive transformation that encourages desistance. Third, socially supportive interventions are better equipped to promote desistance, whereas punishment-oriented interventions (those lacking and undermining social supports) are criminogenic. Finally, social support can help former inmates navigate the many stressors they encounter upon release and contribute to sustaining their desistance.

Conclusions This article reaffirms the value of social support as a fundamental factor in the desistance process. A social support theory of desistance could help integrate much of the criminological research on desistance. Furthermore, putting social support at the center of the discussion of the desistance process would help consolidate a policy agenda that not only reaffirms rehabilitation but also promotes a broader set of policies aimed at constructing a more fair and supportive society. In doing so, it will move the debate away from individuals and make governmental institutions and society as a whole acknowledge their responsibility in the crime problem and their role in promoting desistance.

Keywords Social support · Desistance · Social bonds · Cognitive transformation · Rehabilitation · Re-entry

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Theories of desistance have often emphasized the role of adult social bonds (or "hooks for change") and positive cognitions (or "narrative identities") in fostering desistance. At the same time, correctional scholarship has emphasized how recidivism is increased by incarceration and post-release exclusion and decreased by quality interventions and inclusionary policies. Finally, general strain theory and research from the sociological stress process suggest that social support is integral to coping with negative life experience and achieving change.

In this paper, we show how these pathways that promote or prevent desistance are linked together by a common feature: the presence or absence of social support. For example, the support inherent in quality marriages and jobs deepens attachments and commitments and makes informal social control salient. Social support can also heighten belief in redemption scripts and in positive views (e.g., optimism) that insulate against crime. Within corrections, quality relationships with probation/parole officers, counselors, and family members deliver social support and enhance desistance. By contrast, non-supportive policies and practices (e.g., incarceration, collateral consequences) lead to post-release exclusion and ensnarement in crime. Furthermore, social support is important in providing formerly incarcerated individuals with the material and emotional resources to cope with the stressful challenges that some face from a continued life in crime and in the justice system. The social support paradigm thus organizes much of the previous theory and research on desistance and can serve as an integrating perspective for future scholarship in this area.

The social support perspective is a middle-range theory. Unlike general theories, it does not purport to explain all criminal behavior [73]. It also does not assert that other so-called rival theories are incorrect (see [50]). More modestly, the perspective contends that social support is implicated in virtually all areas of social life and across all stages in the life course. It is a factor that needs to be considered, not ignored. Social support involves providing a person with some form of help or assistance. Although different types have been identified, social support is usually divided into two categories—instrumental, which involves supplying material or informational support, and expressive, which involves supplying emotional or affective support [24, 59, 97]. There is now extensive research showing that social support is negatively related to criminal behavior (for summaries, see [14, 64]).

Based on these empirical findings, we propose that social support affects crime across the life course. Lack of support contributes to the onset and persistence of crime [24, 36, 37]. The failure to receive support can lead re-entering individuals to return to illegal activities [106]. Much like social bonds [88], however, social support is not a stable trait but a variable condition that can effect behavior change. When introduced into individuals' lives, it can be a resource that contributes to their desistance. As noted above, our goal is to present a beginning social support theory of desistance by outlining four "pathways" through which social support makes it possible for ex-offenders to leave behind a life of crime.

Pathway #1: Adult Social Bonds of Quality Marriage and Job

In their classic *Crime in the Making*, Sampson and Laub [88] present their age-graded social bond theory. Using data originally amassed by Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck,

they were able to track the fate of individuals who engaged in crime into adulthood. This focus was important for two reasons. First, Sampson and Laub admonished criminologists for largely ignoring the causal impact of events that occurred beyond the teenage years—a stage in life more easily studied through conventional self-report surveys. Second, they observed that adulthood was a period during which not only continuity but also change took place. Change marked the trajectories even for so-called life-course-persistent offenders because, unless their lives were cut short by death, virtually all members of this group would eventually stop committing crimes. Thus, a fundamental issue in adult criminology was the study of desistance. Such desistance was not a developmental destiny as Moffitt [76] had predicted for some individuals (adolescence-limited) yet not others (life-course-persistent) but a turning point produced by events transpiring at some undetermined moment as an adult. Two defining points of adulthood are marriage and employment. It made sense for Sampson and Laub to propose that a good marriage and a good job had the capacity to pull individuals out of crime.

Indeed, these ties to the conventional order are crucial for persistent offenders who oftentimes lack strong bonds with different social institutions, especially those bonds "involving relationships that can provide nurturing, social support, and informal social control" ([57], p. 280). According to Laub and Sampson [57], individuals who lack a structured routine and live a more chaotic life tend to associate with likewise subjects, similarly detached from others and devoid of supportive relationships.

Sampson and Laub made the theoretical choice to describe marriage and employment as "social bonds." But this was just one of many possible options available to them. Ronald Akers, for example, might have characterized these as "learning environments." For Robert Agnew, they might have been sources of reduced strain compared with life on the street. We are not arguing that marriage and employment are not social bonds that exert controls through attachment, commitment, belief, and involvement. Rather, we are merely suggesting that participating in these conventional adult institutions can have causal effects in multiple ways. No theory, including social bond theory, can plant a criminological flag and declare ownership of marriage and employment. Of course, our contention is that being married and having a job are potential sources of social support that can produce desistance. Moreover, Sampson and Laub's work (1993; see also [57]) hints at, if not shows, this very fact.

Sampson and Laub argue that it is not marriage per se that insulates against crime but a quality marriage. What occurs during marriage that would produce behavioral change? From examining their writings, it is possible to identify four conditions that reduce continued criminal involvement. First, as an intimate relationship unfolds into marriage, individuals become increasingly invested in one another. In essence, the bond of commitment or a "stake in conformity" is heightened. These marital ties "are important insofar as they create interdependent systems of obligation and restraint that impose significant costs for translating criminal propensities into action" ([57], pp. 41–42). Crime thus becomes less rational. Second, marriage influences individuals' routine activities. Being a spouse and parent involves structured conventional time in and around the home. Unstructured leisure time with same-gender peers—including criminal peers—in heterosexual marriages is often knifed off, thus limiting exposure to criminogenic risk factors (i.e., criminal opportunities and associations). Third, spouses exert direct social control, with wives "nagging" heterosexual male ex-offenders to stay

healthy and be responsible for the family's well-being. Fourth, marriage can reshape an individual's identity. Laub and Sampson [57] argue that for some people, getting married is associated with the idea of "getting serious" and "becoming an adult" and leaving waywardness behind.

Running through Laub and Sampson's [57] discussion, however, is the realization that the activities of wives in the Gluecks' sample were rooted in a "base of social support" (p. 43). The line between social control and social support blurs when caring is the motive for ensuring that a criminal husband stays out of trouble and enjoys family life. Indeed, a spouse's effectiveness in dispensing informal control hinges on the person having the legitimacy to tell a partner what to do. Furthermore, a quality marriage involves supplying emotional support, especially in stressful moments, and instrumental support, especially when individuals lack the human capital to negotiate life effectively (e.g., help in filling out a job application, ensuring appropriate clothes are worn in a job interview). These diverse forms of support can have a direct effect on desistance by reducing criminogenic risk factors (e.g., strain), serving as conduits to prosocial successes (e.g., getting a job), and being a positive source of belief in self-worth and redemption. Notably, there is a fairly large literature on social support in the family that could be accessed in future studies of how marital support contributes to desistance (see, e.g., [87]).

The effects of securing a quality job work in similar ways. Stable employment creates a stake in conformity, structured daily routines, direct social control, and a sense of identity (for those in the all-male Gluecks' sample) as "a man" [57]. For many individuals, however, something else is involved: the fact that an employer gave the person "a chance." It is this act of social support that can allow ex-prisoners to escape an often-chaotic life largely devoid of meaningful job opportunities [106]. Providing a job to a formerly incarcerated individual is an act that may involve not only instrumental support (i.e., the job itself) but also emotional support (i.e., a show of trust and caring). A key issue for future research, however, is how individuals re-entering the labor market after incarceration are treated once on the job. Considerable research exists on the salience of supervisory support in affecting job satisfaction, commitment, and success (see, e.g., [13]). Job quality involves not only compensation but also whether the boss is noxious or a source of continuing support. We would hypothesize that supervisory support is a factor in individuals' desistance from crime.

Pathway #2: Redemption Scripts and Positive Attitudes Toward Change ("Optimism")

Because ex-offenders must maintain abstinence from crime over time, desistance is a process that involves more than a specific turning point. Scholars have noted the role of human agency and identity changes in explaining possible mechanisms in this process of desistance [27, 45, 57, 67, 70, 81, 82]. For example, Giordano and her colleagues [45] state that the agentic work should precede the "hooks for change" in order to change a way of life. Maruna [67] argues that ex-prisoners need to find purpose and meaning in life to keep going straight. Paternoster and Bushway [82] assert that at some stage in their criminal careers, individuals experience intentional identity changes from their working selves (which they no longer desire) to their possible selves (which they are

motivated to become). As a result, desistance can be fostered when individuals embrace positive self-narratives and manifest optimism about the future.

In *Making Good*, Maruna [67] analyzes scripts—self accounts of their life stories—that he deduces from qualitative interviews with ex-convicts. In doing so, he observes that desisting individuals are distinguished from active offenders by their expression of redemption as opposed to condemnation scripts. A key feature of redemption scripts is that individuals do not feel destined to a life of crime but rather that they can exert control over their present and future. Desisters internalizing these scripts report that they not only believe in their ability to engage in creative work and be productive but also find such endeavors pleasing and rewarding [67]. As such, desisting individuals are able to develop a coherent prosocial identity. Regardless of whether the person is being realistic, Maruna [67] posits that individuals purposely engaging in a cognitively distortion of their criminal pasts and gaining a sense of control over the future comprise an essential part of "making good."

If the type of scripts matters for desistance, the central question arises: where do these scripts come from? Previous research has relatively been silent on the origin of human agency or the agentic will (for more discussion, see [48, 56, 81]). Maruna [67] illuminates the internal transformation individuals make to free themselves from a life in crime, noting how individuals desisting from crime must overcome challenges to their notion of themselves by constructing a meaningful self-redeeming story. But because his project is mapping identity change, he offers only the broad theme that assistance, not stigmatizing shaming, helps individuals to re-biography their lives. We will be more explicit. Although other factors undoubtedly are involved, we contend that social support can be integral to individuals' development of redemption scripts.

First, support from families and friends can serve as a catalyst to the conversion of scripts and attitudes. Maruna [67] observes that ex-offenders gain confidence and make changes through someone else's support and caring. Some narratives recorded by Maruna clearly show that ex-convicts wanting to change their lives were encouraged by intimate associates to achieve agentic, willful transformation.

Second, support from families and friends can serve to externally validate the person's self-worth and personal value, which would promote redemption scripts and positive attitudes [67]. Social support not only empowers ex-offenders to have confidence from within but it also brings to the fore objective certification that these individuals have merits and the ability to lead a prosocial life. Similarly, support from intimate others reminds ex-prisoners of their prosocial identities (e.g., loving parent, loyal friend). Highlighting other aspects of their identity becomes instrumental in constructing a self-narrative in which crime is no longer central [67]. Therefore, what Maruna [67] calls the "looking-glass recovery process" necessarily requires two types of social support: empowerment and external certification of personal value. In fact, many individuals do not see the value in themselves at first but recognize their own value when they see themselves through the lens of a significant other who believes in them and values prosocial aspects of their persona.

Third, social support in the form of prison visitation might assist the reintegration of prisoners into society by helping them develop positive identities and optimistic attitudes. A host of studies support that prison visitation—both by intimate social ties or by community volunteers—reduces recidivism [6, 7, 18, 19, 39, 41, 72, 75]. During visitation, prisoners might receive both instrumental (e.g., resources, information) and

expressive (e.g., emotion, affection) social support to aid in constructing prosocial identities. In contrast, prisoners who have no contact might have difficulty in developing the purpose or resources required to turn away from crime.

Last, redemption scripts can come from correctional treatment, which can provide another form of social support. The most obvious example of such efforts is narrative therapy, which is exemplified in Maruna's [67] work. Maruna [67] argues that narrative therapy helps individuals reconstruct their self-narratives of their life histories. Research supports that programs to cultivate redemption scripts in correctional settings seem promising as prisoners mature and experience identity changes [10, 23, 95]. Such building on the positive is also central to the Good Lives Model (henceforth GLM; [58, 101, 103, 104, 110, 111]). The goal of GLM is to provide clients with the necessary resources—internal and external—to help them build a good and meaningful life [105]. In a sense that the GLM is interested in improving the quality of individuals' life and strengthening their ability to resist reoffending, this treatment model provides necessary social support to empower ex-offenders.

Beyond impacting the embrace of redemption scripts and positive attitudes leading to desistance, social support might help to sustain a prosocial trajectory. First, according to Maruna [67], desisting individuals can maintain or strengthen redemption scripts by offering social support for other ex-offenders as wounded healers or professional ex-s. He notes that the concern and commitment to help others (e.g., mentoring) are commonly observed among successfully desisting ex-offenders and that voluntary engagement sustains the counselors' desistance by rewarding them with a sense of accomplishment. Moreover, the client receives social support from the counselor to build new scripts and attitudes. Therefore, counseling by ex-cons has reciprocal benefits for the client and the counselor. In fact, desisting individuals as well as their close family and friends serve oftentimes as the most effective therapists because their counseling and sharing of success stories are more openly accepted by clients [67]. In short, desistance can be enhanced not only by receiving but also by providing social support.

Second, social support should be shown in any rituals of redemption that potentially fortify the desisting person's change [30]. The rituals of redemption are a formal process that certifies the rehabilitation of the ex-offender [26, 67, 68]. These ceremonies are distinctive from external validation provided by families and friends in initiating the individual's will to desist. These ceremonies provide the ultimate certification of individuals' desistance. Maruna explains that during redemption rituals, the ex-offender's change in behavior is formally acknowledged by an agent of social control. The public testimonies of friends, family, and conventional others on the desisting person's behalf consist of an essential element of these rituals.

Third, a more inclusionary approach toward reintegration on a public policy level can reinforce redemption scripts and positive attitudes among ex-convicts. Maruna [69] argues that desistance should be framed as a social movement where macro-social changes are made to address structural obstacles faced by ex-offenders. Thus, even if the testimonies of other conventional others are essential to validate the desistance process, the formal certification and endorsement provided by the media, community leaders, and social control officials is key to publicly communicate and make the desistance official. Organizations may promote desistance by strengthening supporting communities and facilitating the consolidation of networks through which individuals

may share their common experiences. The experience of desistance would thus transcend the individual and become a communal experience (see [8, 47, 89]). Considering negative structural barriers that ensnare ex-offenders into further criminality [2, 9, 52, 71, 79], a social movement from offender exclusion to offender inclusion in the correctional process—which is currently under way—is likely to assist the healthy growth of prosocial identities among ex-offenders (see [30]).

In short, social support is important in actualizing the agentic will to change the path of life into behavior as well as in continuing the process of desistance. Although exemplary pathways may vary, two large causal mechanisms can plausibly link social support, prosocial identities, and desistance:

[1] one that develops redemption scripts and positive attitudes (social support ➔ redemption scripts, positive attitudes ➔ desistance) and

[2] another that maintains, if not strengthens, such positive changes (social support ➔ redemption scripts, positive attitudes ➔ social support ➔ redemption scripts, positive attitudes ➔ desistance).

Pathway #3: Social Support from the Correctional System

Social support theory can also provide keys to achieving a better understanding of the consequences of criminal justice interventions and to evaluating more clearly their effectiveness in promoting and sustaining desistance from crime. In fact, social support helps make sense of several common findings from the corrections and sentencing literature. There is a growing consensus in academia around the negative consequences of the policies of mass incarceration and the "get tough" era. The salience of social support in fostering desistance provides insights into why this is so.

First, the concept of social support can help illuminate why harsher and punishment-oriented sanctions do not reduce recidivism but are indeed criminogenic [15, 29, 54, 77, 98]. Research shows that custodial sanctions, which are eminently punishment-oriented, tend to fare worse in reducing recidivism than community-based sanctions. Because punishment is the main goal of prisons, the literature on prison effects focuses on interpreting these findings in light of deterrence theory, which is the theory that would justify its use (see, e.g., [15, 54]).

The main conclusion from this bulk of research is thus that harsher punishments do not deter future criminal involvement. However, less explored are the mechanisms that explain why this is so, and why custodial sanctions may be criminogenic. Importantly, one of the mechanisms through which imprisonment increases reoffending is by its impact on social support. Many studies have documented how the experience of incarceration erodes social relationships—especially family relationships—and weakens social supports [17, 85, 86, 107]. Research has also revealed how the disruption of family relationships poses a challenge for desistance [85, 86, 100]. As noted above, the literature on prison visitation also is relevant to the impact of social support on desistance by showing that family visitation is generally associated with better outcomes within prison, a smoother re-entry process, and higher odds of rehabilitation [6, 18, 40, 42, 72, 74, 75].

Second, social support within prisons is further important in understanding ex-inmates' trajectories upon release. Not all custodial institutions are created equal.

Prisons are by design total institutions that are in essence coercive [92]. However, there is substantial variation in prison environments and in the level of coercion and support received by inmates within prisons [35]. Colvin [21] offers an insightful analysis of different institutional environments within a New Mexico prison across different periods. In his study, Colvin described different eras within the prison and characterized the organizational styles of each period, paying particular attention to whether order was achieved through coercion or support and whether it involved inmates' consent to be governed by an authority deemed legitimate. His study shows that order is better achieved through supportive environments instead of coercion.

Specifically, in the eras in which more social services and programming were provided to inmates (i.e., a more supportive environment was created), order within prison was better maintained. As a result, less violence occurred within the prison and fewer escapes or attempts to escape were observed. This order was sustained on inmates' consent to abide by the prison regulations. Furthermore, Colvin notes that these environments not only improved the way the prison operated and was managed but also produced better ex-prisoners, whose transition to society was smoother and who were more likely to desist from crime. Consistent coercion could achieve the appearance of order by forcing inmates into submission, but it would fail to create relatively autonomous individuals who are able to become law-abiding citizens upon release–that is, to actively and purposely engage in seeking desistance. Thus, Colvin [21] concludes that social support and coercion are important features of prison management that influence prison climate and post-prison behaviors of formerly incarcerated individuals. In this sense, social support within prisons can be a valuable tool to promote desistance (see also [22]).

Other studies have arrived at similar conclusions. Woo et al. [108] analyzed data from a survey of male inmates in 20 South Korean prisons to test whether social support was associated with within-prison violence as well as with recidivism. In their study, expressive and instrumental perceived social support both from the inmate community and from prison staff was shown not only to improve prison outcomes such as lower levels of misconduct, less victimization, and lowered fear of victimization (see also [51, 53]) but also to reduce intentions to offend. These lowered intentions to offend promoted by more supportive prison environments potentially signal the starting point of a process of desistance. With less explicit focus on social support and coercion theory, Duwe's [38] study finds that prison programming not only diminishes prison misconducts and promotes a better prison climate but also is associated with better post-release outcomes for ex-prisoners. More evidence of this link is provided by Hall and Chong [46], who analyze the programs developed within a prison and evaluate their preliminary results. Their analysis shows the salience of what they call a prisons' social climate, which they define as "the social, emotional, organizational and physical characteristics of a correctional institution as perceived by inmates and staff" ([46], p. 231) in fostering reintegration and desistance.

Third, and related to this, understanding the importance of social support for desistance could provide a theory-based framework that encourages the use of alternative sanctions within the criminal justice system and promotes more effective and supportive interventions within the community. Drawing from a social support framework, it is unsurprising, that interventions delivered within the community, as opposed to institutional settings have been shown to be more effective in promoting desistance.

Community interventions are better equipped to provide effective social support because they are not delivered in essentially coercive institutions and can be tailored toward helping clients navigate their daily lives and provide different types of instrumental—but also expressive—support [28, 54, 62]. In fact, research has not only shown that community sanctions fare better than custodial ones but also underscored the wide range of variability within community interventions. In this sense, more supportive and human service-based interventions tend to be more effective in reducing recidivism than community-based programs relying mostly on supervision and control [31, 32, 84]. Lösel's [61] review of different meta-analyses on correctional treatments also reinforces the importance of social support in promoting desistence. When exploring the moderating factors that bolster correctional interventions' effectiveness, he identifies the continuity of support as one of the main factors that explain why some programs are more effective than others (see also [110]).

Fourth, findings regarding the importance of the quality of the client-correctional official relationship for recidivism reinforce the notion that social support is crucial for desistance [55, 65, 80, 90]. While the content of the intervention—and the institutional support provided by the program—clearly matters, the type of relationship that is built between correctional officials and their clients is also highly consequential. Studies of mandated therapy have shown that although these relationships involve higher degrees of control than voluntary therapies, they resemble traditional therapist-client relationship in many ways. Thus, they are predominantly affiliative and autonomy-oriented [65] and provide a blend of care and control [90].

Different studies have shown that the quality of the relationship between parole and probation supervisors and the clients they supervise impacts their reoffending, even when controlling for recidivism risk and personality traits [55, 90]. Paparozzi and Gendreau's [80] study also shows that treatment provided in more supportive organizations tends to render better results in terms of recidivism. The role of correctional officials as agents of desistance seems to be dependent on the quality of the support they are able to provide to their clients. Importantly, studies have also underscored that supportive supervisors and peers improve the job outcomes of correctional officials (i.e., job satisfaction, stress, commitment to their organization), suggesting that the whole chain of supports is important within an organization [12].

Pathway #4: Coping with Negative Life Events and Affect

At his initial formulation of his social support theory, Cullen [24] proposed that social support was best seen as an "organizing concept" for criminology. Social support was not deemed to be the singular cause of crime but an important factor that influences criminal behavior not only directly (a main effect) but also in conjunction with other factors (interaction effects). In this context, a salient mechanism through which social support potentially reduces criminal involvement is by buffering the effects of negative strains on crime. Consistent with Agnew's [1] nuanced formulation of strain theory, supportive networks may reduce the criminogenic effect of life stressors and make criminal coping less likely.

Cullen and Wright [33] are more explicit in the advancement of an integrated strain-social support theory and discuss in detail why an "intellectual marriage" (p. 193)

between these two perspectives is warranted. When doing so, they draw heavily from an abundant theoretical and empirical body of literature in medicine, psychology, and the sociology of health [20, 93, 97]. Research in these fields has shown that social support mitigates the effect of stress and negative events such as discrimination on a wide array of outcomes—from morbidity and mortality, psychological well-being, to work and school adjustment [11, 43, 49, 94, 96]. In fact, in her updated review of the literature for the *Annual Review of Psychology*, Holt-Lunstad [49] asserts that "the stress buffering effect of social support is perhaps one of the most widely researched influences of social relationships on health" (p. 445).

Following the findings from the stress-social support literature, Cullen and Wright [33] describe two main ways in which strain and social support may interact and affect criminal involvement. First, social support may diminish the likelihood that individuals would even experience strain in the first place. That is, if individuals have access to expressive and instrumental social support, they will be insulated from experiencing and perceiving strains. Second, for those who are exposed to strain, social support may bolster resilience and mitigate the effect of such strains on crime. Individuals with more extensive networks of support would have a larger reservoir of behavioral and emotional ways of coping besides engaging in criminal behavior.

From a desistance perspective, both mechanisms can be highly consequential for individuals starting and sustaining a process of desistance. These mechanisms may be particularly salient for individuals re-entering the community after incarceration and those navigating criminal justice supervision. Different studies have documented the massive challenges faced by formerly incarcerated individuals when transitioning back to their communities (see, e.g., [2, 17, 79, 106]). Many ex-prisoners struggle with securing employment, housing, meeting basic human needs, and reconnecting with their family. These challenges are especially salient for those from minoritized populations who tend to cycle from and back to impoverished communities and comprise the majority of individuals released from prison [17, 106]. In addition, ex-felons often face legal barriers to employment, housing, and welfare assistance and the social stigma associated with incarceration, while having to meet the often stringent and demanding supervision requirements and pay for court and supervision costs that rapidly pile up [2, 79].

In his study of 122 men and women in their first year after prison in Massachusetts, Western [106] vividly describes the difficulties they face when navigating their transition back to their old communities and highlights the difference that their network of social support makes in this process. Experiencing extreme poverty and lacking economic funds and housing, most ex-prisoners rely on family, friends, or government assistance for material support in the time immediately following release. In this situation, social support makes the difference between, for example, experiencing the strain of homelessness and having a place to live upon release. The process of "becoming free" is in itself anxiety and stress inducing—from learning how to use public transportation to adapting to being out in public spaces. Social integration—and expressive support—is key in helping ex-prisoners cope with these stressors and more successfully adapt to a life outside prison. Here the salient mechanism is the buffering effect. The extreme vulnerability—in Western terms "human frailty"—experienced by ex-prisoners makes social support decisive for their subsequent adjustment. Whether it is providing social connections that would allow the ex-prisoners to obtain employment, giving money or a place to stay when ex-inmates are unable to support

themselves, or driving parolees to a supervision appointment, the role of social support as both strain suppressor and strain mitigator is clear throughout Western's book.

It goes without saying that all these processes are closely intertwined with the process of desistance. Although Western [106] insists that recidivism is not the only measure of success, desistance from crime is undoubtedly a necessary—albeit not sufficient—component of a successful reintegration. Focusing explicitly on desistance, Cid and Martí's [16] study of ex-prisoners in Spain provides important keys to assess the value of different theories of desistance. In their study, they seek to compare the explanatory power of three different theories of desistance to account for the process of desistance of the subjects included in their study: Sampson and Laub's [88] age-graded social bond theory; Giordano et al. [45] and Maruna's [67] cognitive transformation theory; and Cullen [24] and Cullen and Wright's [33] social support/strain theory.

Cid and Martí [16] identify the mechanisms through which social support-strain theory may explain both the origin and the maintenance of desistance from offending. The obstacles reported by ex-prisoners are then seen as stressors that ex-prisoners are unable to deal with due to their lack of social supports. Analyzing the narratives of the ex-prisoners included in the study, they find that the cognitive transformation and notion of agency that initiated the process of desistance—even within incarceration— were often anchored in socially supportive relationships from family and partners that provided the motivation for desistance and were committed to accompany their process. The maintenance of desistance was also very much explained within the social support-strain framework, both through the strain mitigation mechanism and by the access to hooks for change that social support networks provided (i.e., employment).

Remarkably, Cid and Martí [16] argue that social support-strain is the only theory that helps understand why desistance is maintained under unfavorable conditions. Even while most individuals in their study failed to achieve a prosocial adult role (by obtaining stable employment or getting married), many nevertheless maintained their desistance. This finding, which contradicts the precepts of social bond theory, was explained by the fact that desisters were still receiving steady social support. It was social support that allowed them to remain out of crime. Individuals who were unsuccessful in achieving a prosocial adult role and did not count on either expressive or instrumental social supports were unable to maintain their desistance from crime. In this scenario, cognitive transformation was many times not enough to sustain desistance if it was not backed by strong social supports. In sum, Cid and Martí conclude that while social bond and cognitive transformation explain desistance in some cases (e.g., younger, late-onset individuals), social support-stress theory is the perspective that consistently explains desistance. A similar observation is made by Soyer [91] in her study of juveniles in Boston and Chicago. Analyzing the life trajectories of formerly incarcerated youth, she finds that both "automatic desistance" and "imagined desistance" are threatened by the strains juveniles encounter in their daily lives and that only those juveniles that received key social supports were able to successfully desist from crime.

Although these studies lend credence to the idea that social support is quintessential for promoting and sustaining desistance during re-entry, the effects of social support are not uniform. Martinez and Abrams's [66] meta-synthesis of studies on re-entry and social support is instructive, showing that, while generally positive, not every type of social support promotes desistance. In particular, the social support provided by friends is generally ambivalent and may facilitate crime. Furthermore, while families generally

encourage prosocial behaviors, their social support could prove deleterious for a desistance process because it may trigger noxious family dynamics and place too much pressure on the individuals, who may feel burdened by loved one's unrealistic expectations about their re-entry process. In this sense, Pettus-Davis et al. [86] found important gender and race differences in the type of support (negative and positive) reported by ex-prisoners, whereas Pettus-Davis et al. [85] showed the instability of social support, which tends to decline after release. Social support has also been shown to yield more positive effects for individuals serving community sentences [85].

The salience of social support for mitigating the problems faced by ex-inmates becomes crucial for developing effective re-entry programs. There is debate in the literature about what constitutes an effective re-entry intervention [60, 63, 83, 99]. The evidence showing how crucial social support is for desistance suggests that interventions should aim at expanding social supports. In fact, social support is an important domain for correctional risk assessments and constitutes one of the big needs to target for treatment within the highly validated Risk-Need-Responsivity model of correctional rehabilitation [3–5, 44]. The literature on social support and desistance reinforces this idea and calls for better programing aiming at strengthening individuals' prosocial skills and reinforcing family bonds [60, 63]. But the social support and desistance framework also encourages a broadening of the scope of evidence-based interventions to encompass services generally provided within re-entry programs from a theoretically oriented perspective. Beyond changing the individual, this perspective highlights the responsibility of the programs to provide much-needed material and instrumental support to the clients. Thus, employment counseling, education, and basic resources such as transportation or access to public assistance would be conceptualized as targets of intervention in their own right that would be deemed to reduce individuals' risk of recidivism and promote desistance. Supportive employment programs, which provide support to not only ex-prisoners but also their employers such as those proposed by Pager [78], could be easily incorporated into this perspective.

In practical terms, this approach could mean bridging a more strength-based approach to corrections, such as the previously discussed GLM [102, 105], with the RNR risk-based model. This merger will promote re-entry programs that, instead of focusing exclusively on clients' risks, would also aim at supporting their achieving "good lives" in socially acceptable ways, understanding that a successful reintegration and lower risk of recidivism are two sides of the same coin. In fact, Ziv's [110] proposal of integrating the RNR and GLM models of correctional treatment into the Risk-Need-Responsivity-Motivation (RNRM) model emphasizes the need to both promote clients' skills to develop and sustain social supports and provide continuity of care that would allow them to achieve their human goods.

In broader terms, mitigating the effects of mass incarceration, especially in communities disproportionally affected by concentrated incarceration [17], could go great lengths in reducing barriers for successful re-entry. When individuals are sent to prison, they both require more social supports for themselves and become unable to provide social support for others. At the aggregate level, concentrated mass incarceration weakens communities because it reduces the availability of social supports while increasing the need for social support [17]. Besides client-oriented rehabilitation policies, criminal justice policies aiming at curbing mass incarceration and diminishing the collateral consequences associated with incarceration—as well as broader social

policies strengthening communities, curbing poverty and inequality, combating racism, and expanding the welfare state—could prove essential to promoting desistance from crime. A social support theory of desistance can provide an important theoretical framework to "reaffirming rehabilitation" and broadening the scope of crime-reduction policies, centered not only on the individual but also on the government's responsibility in building a more inclusive and supportive society.

Conclusion

Introduced 25 years ago, social support theory provided a much-needed perspective on crime and crime policy that had been largely absent from the criminological debate (see [24, 36, 37]). Presented as a "middle-range" theory, Cullen's [24] version of social support theory affirmed the value of social support as an important "organizing concept" in criminology with specific policy implications (for an alternative version developed independently, see [36, 37]). Social support was not deemed to be the one and only general cause of all criminal involvement. Rather, his social support theory provided a series of propositions that delineated the many ways in which social support influenced crime, most of the time operating in conjunction with known sources of crime highlighted by mainstream criminological theories (i.e., social control, strain).

Today, the promise of social support theory remains somewhat unfulfilled. Even though many tests of social support theory have emerged (for an updated review, see [14]), social support has not been systematically incorporated into the study of crime. The little attention that it has elicited from life-course theory is one of the most glaring omissions in this regard. The growth of developmental and life-course theories of crime has been of fundamental importance in advancing criminological thinking and has allowed the field to move beyond the "adolescence-limited" paradigm that characterized the field when social support theory was first proposed [25]. In this context, our goal has been to show that social support is an integral part of individuals' life course and their potential desistance from crime. Moving forward, important opportunities for research and challenges remain—issues addressed in the following sections.

Building a Research Agenda on Social Support and Desistance

As discussed, our social support theory of desistance delineates four different pathways through which social support can exert crime-reduction effects. First, social support is an important component of major turning points ("hooks for change") delineated by Sampson and Laub [88]. The social control provided within these social bonds is more effective when it is exerted within a supportive and caring relationship. Second, social support facilitates and sustains cognitive transformation and identity change. Third, social support explains why punitive interventions do not work and it is a salient component for effective correctional interventions. Correctional interventions that undermine social supports do not promote desistance, whereas support-oriented correctional programs are better equipped to foster desistance. Finally, social support protects individuals from suffering strains and promotes non-criminal coping when stressor events occur. Thus, social supports are crucial for keeping ex-prisoners out of crime during their re-entry and mitigate the effects of the many stressors they encounter

upon release. Building on these ideas, we believe that social support theory can serve to advance the criminology of desistance and reinvigorate life-course theory. In particular, the theory has the potential to illuminate new avenues for research on desistance, organized around the four pathways delineated in this article.

Related to Pathway #1, research on turning points should incorporate a social support perspective and seek to identify the different types of social supports that facilitate desistance and the agents more successful in delivering effective social support. The salience of different agents and even the content of the support provided would likely vary across different life-course stages. Drawing from the age-graded social bond theory [88], researchers could aim at differentiating the control and support functions embedded within social relationships and social networks and elucidate which are more conducive to desistance and whether and when do they work together (see, [109]).

Related to Pathway #2, in a similar vein, researchers may wish to focus on exploring the role of social support in promoting redemption scripts and sustaining an individual's cognitive transformation. Shedding light on the cognitive underpinnings of desistance has been instrumental for gaining a nuanced understanding of the non-deterministic nature of the desistance process and the role of cognitions, identity, and human agency in such process. However, how human agency is exerted and why certain individuals are able to sustain a positive identity change remains unclear [27]. The different forms of social support involved in this process could be crucial to better understanding how and why individuals exercise their agency, and the material and affective conditions that expand or constrain their choices. Social support theory differentiates between perceived and objective social support [97]. Future research could help understand this conundrum and disentangle how perceived and actual social support may foster a positive identity transformation. But research can also study whether the cognitive changes brought by identity transformation are associated with an increase in perceived social support. That is, individuals that affirm a positive identity may be more prone to value the social support they might have been already been receiving and to perceive it as such and capitalize on it. A fruitful line of research thus can help focus on exploring why identity transformation helps desistance through increased social support.

Related to Pathway #3, a social support theory of desistance underscores the need to develop non-punitive criminal justice policies. Guided by the precepts of social support theory, criminal justice correctional interventions can more explicitly seek to identify social support shortfalls and aim at strengthening the institutions that better provide the needed support. A life-course perspective would recognize the changing nature of such needs over time and focus on identifying which social supports should be targeted at each stage of the life course. The provision of social support should no longer be an afterthought of effective criminal justice interventions but a carefully researched and evaluated component. Furthermore, social support theory invites researchers to better explore the mechanisms that explain why punitive interventions do not work and to trace how coercive interventions have long-lasting effects on individuals' capacity to build and maintain key supporting networks that could support their desistance.

Related to Pathway #4, and narrowly focusing on the challenges faced by released prisoners, research on re-entry initiatives could greatly benefit from a social support–oriented focus. While many studies have documented the salience of institutional and informal social supports in the re-entry process, these findings often come from

qualitative studies that carefully document the challenges faced by ex-prisoners when navigating their re-entry process [91, 106]. The importance of social supports is an element that often emerges from their life narratives but rarely something that drives the inquiry. Social support theory can give this line of inquiry a solid theoretical background that would guide hypothesis-driven research (quantitative and qualitative) aimed at disentangling the role of different types of social support (i.e., instrumental or expressive) on the experiencing of strains, the coping strategies for dealing with such strains, and the mitigation of the effects of experienced strains on the path to desistance.

Future Challenges

In short, a social support theory of desistance could generate a fruitful research agenda that would seek to specify the role of different forms of social support on different pathways to desistance and unravel the interplay between social support and other key mechanisms that promote or preclude a successful desistance process. However, for this research agenda to succeed, it must overcome the many challenges faced by social support theory in general that have precluded a fuller incorporation of social support theory into the criminological mainstream. While there is cumulative evidence showing that the mechanisms of social support are important for understanding why individuals engage in crime, most studies do not explicitly test social support propositions. Rather, variables concerning social support are subsumed into different theoretical constructs or conceptualized as emergent ad hoc findings [14]. Systematic tests of social support theory remain scarce.

Despite being conceived as a "middle-range" theory, social support has an ambitious scope, as it relates to a ubiquitous social phenomenon. As such, the concept of social support faces definitional problems: the agents and types of social support have not been clearly defined or studied. Perhaps more importantly, criminological research on social support has not incorporated validated measures of this construct that clearly differentiate different types of social support—instrumental or expressive, perceived or actual—or agents providing it—family, friends, social networks, institutions [14]. A research agenda on social support and desistance could help to revitalize social support theory and show its promise only if it takes the theory seriously, overcoming the empirical eclecticism that has characterized research in social support. To do so, it should put social support at the forefront of its scientific inquiry and carefully think about its dimensions, differentiate types and agents providing social support, and examine the relevant agents that provide social support at different stages of an individual life course as well as the types of social support that more effectively promote desistance.

Besides providing a more nuanced understanding of the desistance process, social support theory has the added challenge of playing a larger role in setting a clear direction for policy (see [34]). As noted, social support theory rejects the thinking that supported the get tough movement and legitimated the rise of mass incarceration. A social support-based agenda would serve to curb the noxious consequences of mass incarceration and build a theoretically driven agenda aiming at diminishing punishment and promoting reintegration and redemption through supportive correctional treatment and re-entry programs. Furthermore, because it does not focus on individuals' deficits and risk but on their social environments, social support reminds us of our

responsibility as a society. Social support theory helps visualize the broader social failures that deepen individuals' vulnerabilities and set them up for failure. As such, it compels policymakers into building more inclusive societies and stronger communities as well as working toward reducing inequality and social exclusion.

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