

## **Desistance Research and Probation Practice: Knowledge Exchange and Co-producing Evidence-Based Practice Models**

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**Summary:** Criminology, by its very nature, has always been an applied discipline, yet in recent years there has been a consistent push to encourage academic researchers to engage with the ‘real world’ and demonstrate the impact their research has on wider society outside of so-called ‘ivory towers’. This paper describes one such effort at ‘knowledge exchange’ funded by the UK’s Economic and Social Research Council that sought to bring the academic research on ‘desistance from crime’ to a wider audience than the one that would typically read academic research. The project involved the development of a short documentary and a series of workshops involving researchers, practitioners, policy-makers and (most importantly) ex-prisoners and their families. Implications of this experience for co-producing evidenced-based policy-making are discussed.

**Keywords:** Desistance, knowledge exchange, evidence-based policy, probation.

### **Introduction**

Academics are (in)famous for our pointy-headed irrelevance and most of our made-up jargon words are duly ignored by the general public in preference for plain language whenever possible. The word ‘desistance’, then, may be one of the ugliest and strangest academic jargon words to somehow have crept its way into policy and practice discussions outside

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of academia. Prior to the 1980s, the term was only heard in commands shouted by television show police officers to 'cease and desist', but in the 1980s and 1990s the word 'desistance' (and the even worse term 'desisters') began to be used in academic research on 'criminal careers' to describe the 'retirement' phase of these so-called careers (this career metaphor has since been replaced by a focus on 'crime in the life course'). For the most part this term was used to describe aggregate patterns and trajectories, especially the right-side tail of the so-called 'age-crime curve' demonstrating the relationship between age on one axis and criminal behaviour on the other (see, e.g., Sampson and Laub, 1993).

Beginning around 2000, however, a series of qualitative studies, out of the United Kingdom in particular, began to interrogate what the process of desistance actually looked and felt like on an individual level (see e.g. Bottoms and Shapland, 2011; Farrall, 2002; Farrall and Calverley, 2006; Maruna, 2001; Maruna, Wilson and Curran, 2006). These studies, along with US-based research by Laub and Sampson (2003), Giordano and colleagues (2002), Shover (1996) and others, became known by the shorthand moniker of 'desistance research'. This work caught the attention of a number of more policy-oriented academics, especially in the field of probation research in the UK, who saw in these studies an evidence base that spoke directly to issues impacting probation practice (see especially Maguire and Raynor, 2006; McCulloch and McNeill, 2008; McNeill, 2003; McNeill and Weaver, 2010; Porporino, 2010; Rex, 1999; Weaver and McNeill, 2010). And so was born the strange creature sometimes called the 'desistance paradigm' (McNeill, 2006) or 'desistance-based practice' (Farrall & Maruna, 2004) in probation work, whatever this might entail.

Despite the terrible name, and a still-emerging conceptual development, the idea of desistance-based practice appears to be catching on. The last two directors of the National Offender Management Service (NOMS) for England and Wales have taken to using the term 'desistance' frequently in public speeches, and the *Evidence Report* on which Kenneth Clarke's Green Paper *Breaking the Cycle: Effective Punishment, Rehabilitation and Sentencing of Offenders* is based uses the terms 'desist' and 'desistance' no fewer than 20 times (Ministry of Justice, 2010). In Northern Ireland, desistance and the desistance research played a key role in the recent Prison Review rethinking the purpose of imprisonment in Northern Ireland (Prison Review Team, 2011). The biggest impact has surely been in Scotland, where the desistance research has been influential in everything from the new National Outcomes and Standards

for Criminal Justice Social Work Services in Scotland (see Chapman, 2011) to the new ‘community payback’ order (McCulloch, 2010).

As the spread of interest in desistance has been primarily organic and ground-up, the impact has been inconsistent and not especially coherent. As a result, there is considerable potential for co-optation and misuse of the concept to promote ends far from the original vision of proponents and champions (for a similar story regarding restorative justice and the justice model, see Maruna, 2011). Indeed, in an exciting but somewhat concerning development, the the US National Institute of Justice has commissioned a field experiment of a ‘desistance-focused’ supervision model meant to be in part ‘based on Maruna’s (2001) transtheoretical model of desistance’ yet the actual implementation model described in the grant announcement bears little resemblance to either desistance theory or the emerging academic proposals around desistance-based practice (US Department of Justice, 2012).

Partially to address this, a group of researchers associated with desistance research and desistance-based practice (McNeill, Farrall and Maruna) and an expert on research-to-practice ‘knowledge exchange’ work (Lightowler) applied for and received funding from the UK’s Economic and Social Research Council to develop a formal project of ‘Desistance Knowledge Exchange’ (DesKE). Working in partnership with NOMS, the Probation Board for Northern Ireland, and the Community Justice Division of the Scottish Government, DesKE is intended to develop and flesh out the idea of desistance-based practice through a process of co-production. The two phases of the still ongoing project involve, firstly, the co-production of a documentary film about desistance, to be used both as a standalone training and supervision tool and as a prompt for the second stage, which involves a series of workshops in which stakeholders discuss and debate the development of ‘practice for desistance’, leading to the production of an outline model of a practice framework.

In this paper, we will discuss the origins and thinking behind this project, detail some of its achievements to date, and provide a preliminary discussion of some of the emerging lessons learned from the knowledge exchange work to date.

### **Academia and the ‘real world’**

Those of us working in academia oftentimes get a bad reputation for being ‘too academic’, which is somewhat ironic. Trapped in so-called

'ivory towers', we are said to be elitist, obscure, and basically irrelevant to those who inhabit a place called the 'real world'. For the most part such stereotypes are harmless, yet, like all forms of labelling, these caricatures can become self-fulfilling, with the presumption of irrelevance leading to actual marginalisation and eventual irrelevance if no one pays any attention to academic work.

As an applied discipline, criminology depends in many ways on being relevant to policy and practice, and the perception that our work is marginalised or ignored is a familiar complaint in the field (see e.g. Latessa *et al.*, 2002). Criminologists complain that unlike other fields (medicine is the most frequent parallel made – but see Maruna and Barber, 2011), criminal justice work 'is not viewed as a professional area of practice, replete with a growing body of core psychological knowledge and opinion with which practitioners and managers should be familiar before "innovative" programs are introduced' (Andrews *et al.*, 1990). Instead, 'Academic researchers have remained largely detached from criminal justice decision making and instead have been invited to evaluate a program only after a plan, often a haphazard one, has been created' (Martin *et al.*, 1981).

This has changed in recent years. Indeed, at a recent National Institute of Justice Annual Conference, US President Barack Obama's Attorney General Eric Holder warmed many academic hearts in the room when he said:

Let me be clear: this administration shares your belief in the power of evidence-based research to help address some of our nation's most significant challenges. President Obama has renewed our nation's commitment to rely on science in the development of public policy. He understands, as I do, that sound judgement derives from solid evidence. (Austin, 2009)

Although the meaning of the phrase appears to differ depending on who uses it, 'evidence-based practice' has clearly become the mantra of the hour – so much so that the UK government adviser Louise Casey has been heard to remark, 'If No. 10 [Downing Street] says bloody "evidence-based policy" to me one more time, I'll deck them' (Bowcott 2005).

Far from lingering on the margins, in the new evidence-based era, academic criminologists have constructed a newly empowering role for ourselves and ensured a type of legitimacy for our discipline; however, it

is a narrow form of power. We have become the arbiters of ‘what works’ (but see also Hope, 2004). Like High Court judges we have the power to determine what programmes are and are not ‘evidence-based’ – a label that can determine the fate of an entire vocation, such as anger management counselling, job training or cognitive-behavioural counselling in criminal justice settings. Yet, as Susan Martin and colleagues wrote in 1981, such an approach casts our primary contribution around our abilities as programme evaluators (or aggregators of others’ programme evaluations), tracking outcomes and measuring statistically significant impacts. Not only does this represent only a tiny fraction of what criminology as a discipline has to offer, but such functions can be (and are) carried out equally well by those without any criminological background at all.

Additionally, many criminologists are uncomfortable with the notion that our value depends on playing the role of expert judge of practice. The idea that we know best ‘what works’, because only we have the cumulative evaluation data and our job is mainly to impose this knowledge on practitioners, sits uncomfortably with many in academia. It also can be a source of irritation among practitioners, managers and criminal justice clients who cannot argue with a meta-analysis but find actual guidance provided by academic research limited in its usefulness. Indeed, the evidence from recent reform efforts in community corrections (McNeill *et al.*, 2010), and from the broader literature on research utilisation (Buckley and Whelan, 2009; Nutley *et al.*, 2007; Landry *et al.*, 2001; Shonkoff, 2000) suggests that top-down processes of evidence-based practice (EBP) implementation often fail to generate the kinds of commitment and enthusiasm from practitioners (and service users) that are critical to the success of such efforts.

### **Towards a different sort of ‘knowledge’ and ‘exchange’**

Research on the process of desistance from crime is distinctly different from programme evaluation research. For one thing, the research puts the person’s life at the centre of the research enquiry and not any particular programme (McNeill, 2012). There is good reason for this. Although individuals may pass through dozens of structured programmes in a lifetime, most evidence suggests that these limited interventions have relatively little, if any, impact on life outcomes (Lewis, 1990). Desistance research also generally does not ask ‘what works’ in turning lives around,

but rather ‘how’ the process works and ‘why’ (Burnett, 1992; Maruna, 2001; Farrall, 2002). The focus is on the long-term, dynamic interactions that help individuals move away from criminal behaviour, but more importantly help them stay away from returning to such behaviours in the face of life crises and stresses (Burnett & Maruna, 2006; Paternoster & Bushway, 2010).

The research, as such, tends to ‘ring true’ to both ex-prisoners themselves and those who work with them professionally or personally (see Harris, 2005), and indeed the support from activists and practitioners for this work has been one of the key reasons it has been elevated from academic obscurity to a sort of buzzword of the moment. Nonetheless, unlike the ‘what works’ programme evaluation research, desistance research has frustrated many practitioners because it does not offer clear answers as to how to reduce reoffending and lacks an ‘organised practice framework’ (Porporino, 2010). In other words, although the research is interesting and appears to capture some possible truths, it is not clear what, if any, value it has for the ‘real world’ – or at least a ‘real world’ accustomed to the top-down instructions of the evidence-based practice era.

This was the challenge that led to the creation of the ESRC-funded ‘Desistance Knowledge Exchange’ (DesKE) project. The goal of this work was to generate a genuine dialogue between academic researchers, policy-makers, practitioners and, crucially, service users (e.g. probationers and ex-probationers) and their families in relation to desistance from crime and how probation policy can best support it.

Our method is based on the analysis of ‘knowledge to action’ by Best *et al.* (2009) involving research dissemination; building relationships between policy, practice and academia; and embedding research into organisations and systems. The DesKE is intended to:

1. develop with key stakeholders user-friendly methods of disseminating existing research about desistance from crime and about supporting desistance in offender supervision
2. foster dialogue and communication between stakeholders about desistance and how best to support it, drawing not just on research but on the experiences of managers, practitioners, (ex-)service users and families
3. co-produce a set of clear recommendations about the further development of ‘practice for desistance’, and begin to delineate the

features of an organised framework for offender supervision practice to support desistance.

In order to meet objective (1) above, this first phase of the project involved the production of a 45-minute documentary film which explores the desistance process called *The Road from Crime*. The film (directed by Eamonn Devlin) was developed by Lagan Media Productions, a Belfast-based company with considerable experience of criminal justice related projects, and was centred around the life story of Allan Weaver, a former prisoner turned probation professional in Scotland (see Weaver, 2008). Contributors to the film include some of the most prominent ex-prisoner activists in the UK, such as Bobby Cummines of UNLOCK and Mark Johnson of User Voice, as well as eight other, less prominent former and current prisoners and probationers. Other voices converging in the film include those of Probation Officers, ex-prisoner family members, policy-makers and desistance researchers in both the UK and the US. Ahead of this, we also produced a summary of the evidence base for attendees (McNeill *et al.*, 2012).

The film, however, is not the only co-production representing multiple voices involved in the reintegration process. We also created a website around the film with a blog titled 'Discovering Desistance' that has attracted responses and postings from a variety of practitioners and researchers, as well as former prisoners and their families. The second phase of our research also involves a series of ongoing regional workshops in London, Glasgow, Belfast, Sheffield, Polmont (Scottish Prison Service), and, eventually, Washington, DC. These workshops, facilitated by Lightowler, are premised around the process of appreciative inquiry, made famous in criminology by Alison Liebling's pioneering prisons research (see Liebling *et al.*, 2001). In line with the second aim listed above, each meeting was limited to 40–50 invitees with groups chosen to reflect a balance of Probation Officers, policy-makers, researchers and, most importantly, service users including current probation clients, ex-prisoners, and their families. At the Belfast meeting, for instance, there were representatives from Irish Probation, the Northern Ireland Prison Service, NIACRO, Extern, the Prince's Trust, the Police Service of Northern Ireland, the NI Department of Justice, and several other groups and organisations as well as the PBNI, of course. While in Sheffield we hosted similar groups, as well as former service users and those employing reformed offenders directly from prison. The Glasgow and London

seminars also involved people with a range of perspectives on how and why people stop offending. The workshops (broken into two days) involved, first, a showing of the documentary, then a series of focused small-group discussions on ways in which the ideas raised in the film might impact probation practice in particular and criminal justice thinking in general.

A primary outcome of these workshops will be the achievement of the third aim listed above – the co-production of a set of recommendations regarding the further development of ‘practice for desistance’. After all, although the effective dissemination of desistance research is a key aspiration of this project, the evidence clearly demonstrates that ‘even good dissemination is not enough if policy and practice change is the goal’ (Nutley, 2003, p. 9). We hope to move beyond dissemination by focusing instead on *co-producing* knowledge about the desistance process by developing relationships through which we will draw on the expertise and experience of practitioners, families and service users, as well as on research findings generated by academics. The new insights developed through this process will then be shared with a wide audience of interested stakeholders. Finally, this project is intended as a catalyst for subsequent work focused more closely on the development of systems (which will necessarily be different in each jurisdiction) to embed the knowledge developed in this project within relevant organisations. This builds on the reflection of Nutley and colleagues (2010, pp. 135–136) that ‘For knowledge to be used it needs not only to be embedded in relationships but also interwoven with the priorities, cultures and contexts of organizations and systems’.

### **The story so far**

It is too early to draw any firm conclusions about the effectiveness or impact of this knowledge exchange process, as we are only beginning the second phase of the project at the time of writing. However, as we have now completed the first part of the project (the production of the documentary film), it is an appropriate juncture to reflect on some of the lessons learned in that process.

We aimed to make a film that was neither fully educational nor fully artistic, but struck a balance between the two and achieved the best of both formats. So we did not want an information-heavy video with talking heads, PowerPoint slides, statistics and graphs about desistance from crime. Although it was very tempting to communicate in this way (the

only way that the three of us academics know), we decided that if we were going to go down this route, we might as well just give traditional academic lectures on film, and the point of this project was that we would communicate in a different way in order to reach an audience that may not spend its free time downloading TED videos ([ted.com](http://ted.com)) or attending academic conferences.

At the same time, we did have some specific research findings and academic theory that we wanted to convey, and could not sacrifice this content either. We did some surveying of existing documentaries around issues of ex-prisoner resettlement into society, and some of these are absolutely tremendous. They are poignant, moving, shocking at times, as well as being beautifully crafted and produced. They can also 'educate' in their own way by providing dramatic insight into the lives of one or more ex-prisoners trying to turn their lives around. Yet they are also explicitly anecdotal, they do not seek to frame the stories they tell in a rigorous analysis of the structural context of the reintegration situation, and (because they are not obligated to do so) they provide little in terms of explanations or indeed solutions for the issues the films dramatise. Although we knew that our own film would also raise more questions than it would be able to answer, we wanted to go beyond conveying important human stories and also provide some level of analysis of this sort.

This balance was no easy task (and how well we achieved it in the end is a matter for audiences and reviewers to decide). The first lesson, learned somewhat painfully over a nine-month period between September 2011 and May 2012, is that film-making is awfully hard and should not be attempted without the strong guidance of professionals. This may seem obvious, but there are so many similarities between qualitative research and documentary film production that it was easy in the early stages of the film production to think that we knew what we were doing. After all, like qualitative research, the documentary was dependent on (a) finding the right 'sample' of participants, (b) asking the right questions of them to evoke powerful stories and self-insights, and then (c) cutting and editing the material together in a way that delivers a coherent message. Collectively, we have been doing this sort of thing in our writing for years, so we did not anticipate the countless complications and difficulties that would be involved once an audio-visual component was added to the process.

Of course, there is the technology and all that it entails. As interviewers, all of us have been in situations when our audio recorders have not

worked, but film-making introduces dozens of other opportunities for mechanical failure and we experienced every one of them at one point or another. On top of that, dozens of truly brilliant quotes and stories, which might have worked perfectly in a book or article, had to be lost from the film because the speaker mumbled them or got tongue-tied, interrupted or off-track before she or he could finish. In traditional qualitative interviewing, it matters little whether a particularly noisy duck is quacking in the background during an interview on a park bench, but during our film-making one such duck nearly cost us one of our best interviews (no animals were hurt during the production of the film, but it was close with that one). The crew and equipment hire is so expensive that rescheduling a second 'take' was rarely an option, and although amazing things could be done in the editing suite, we were all surprised at how much substantively useful material wound up on the proverbial 'cutting room floor'.

Indeed, five whole interviews, each requiring a half a day or more to film, including all the travel involved, ended up not appearing in the final film for reasons other than the content of the interviews. In one case, an interviewee (who spoke powerfully of the stigma and harassment she had faced as an ex-prisoner) asked to be pulled from the film at the last minute for fear of further exposure. Although some faces in the documentary are distorted and some names changed to preserve anonymity, because of the nature of this project as an outreach effort (which will be available for free to watch on the Internet), a new level of confidentiality and ethical consideration was required.

It was on these issues that we occasionally found ourselves at odds with the extraordinarily talented film company with whom we were collaborating. As researchers with a duty of care to our interviewees, the four of us felt that some of the interview material that the film-makers, rightly, argued made for the most compelling viewing (e.g., intimate discussions of interviewees' family situations, detailed descriptions of seriously violent acts, often tragic accounts of family upbringings) was too personal to include in the film. Although all interviewees clearly gave their informed consent to participate and knew that their responses might end up on an online documentary, we worried that we did not have the same consent from their family members or others in their lives (who might be identified, not by name, but because their father's or son's face was appearing on screen), and we worried that interviewees themselves might come to regret how candid they were. We also argued that although these

powerful discussions conveyed important personal and emotional truths for the interviewees, the specific content was not essential for the overall messages of the documentary. This was the line between educational and artistic we had to walk, and it was anything but easy or clear-cut.

The only way to judge whether we struck this balance correctly is to monitor the impact of the film in achieving its aims. This will be easier in the short term – by assessing how well the film operates as a catalyst for discussion at the scheduled regional workshops – than it will in the long term as an online resource (although we will be able to track the number of viewings and downloads, and we will solicit qualitative feedback online in the form of a moderated ‘comments’ function). So far, however, the response has been very positive. One participant in the first Belfast workshop said that the film worked for her ‘both at an emotional level and at an educational one’. The same is rarely said for academic journal articles or public lectures, which explains why they tend to have a limited ability to reach the sort of wide audiences that film can. If the film gets similar reactions from other viewers, even outside the criminal justice system, it may even help an awful term like ‘desistance’ to escape a fate of pointy-headed irrelevance and make an impact in the ‘real world’.

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