

**Nevertheless, he
desisted**
*strategies that men
use to stop sexually
offending*

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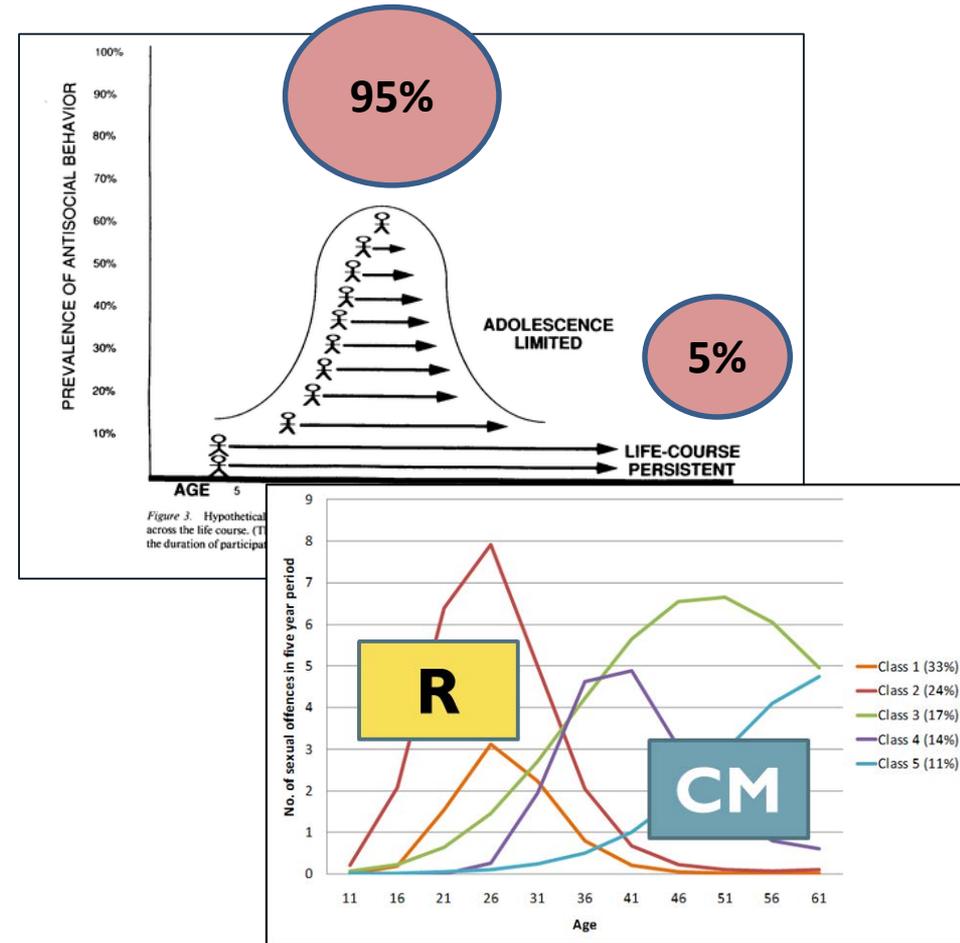
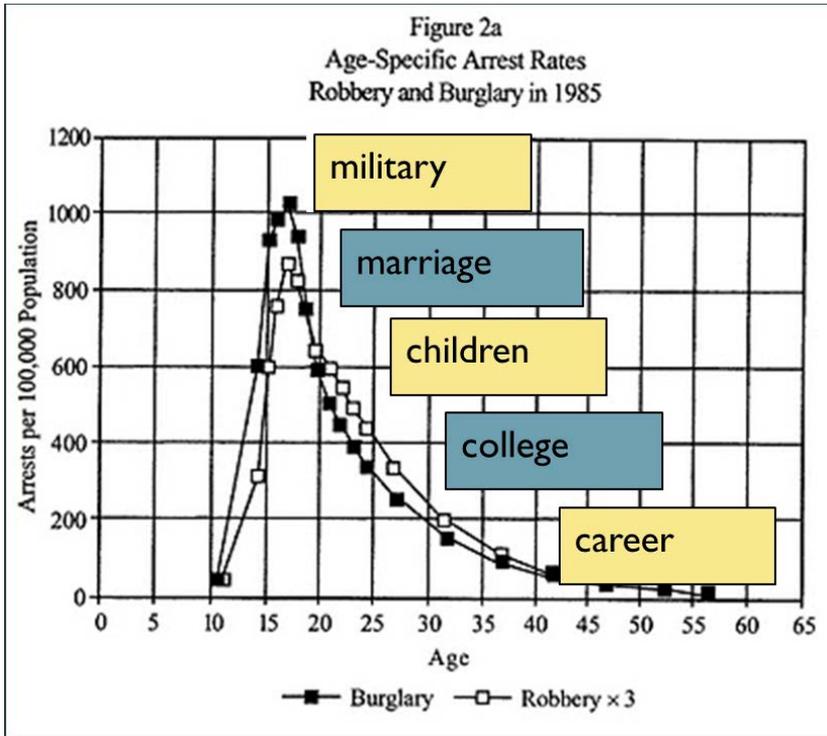
Presentation Overview

- Defining and deconstructing desistance
- What we know so far
- Method: participants, procedure, and thematic analysis
- Results:
 - from what did they desist?
 - what strategies did they use?
- Implications, conclusions, and next steps

Defining Desistance

- A key component of the criminal career paradigm
- A staple of criminological thought for 200 years
- A natural human process (observed in numerous studies)
- An empirical reality, even among individuals convicted of sexual offenses (small recidivism rate)
- **BUT**
 - *Industry* has grown to emphasize risk and containment
 - Assumption of recidivism (escalation and specialization)
 - Impact of current public policy (esp. in the US) – stigma & label

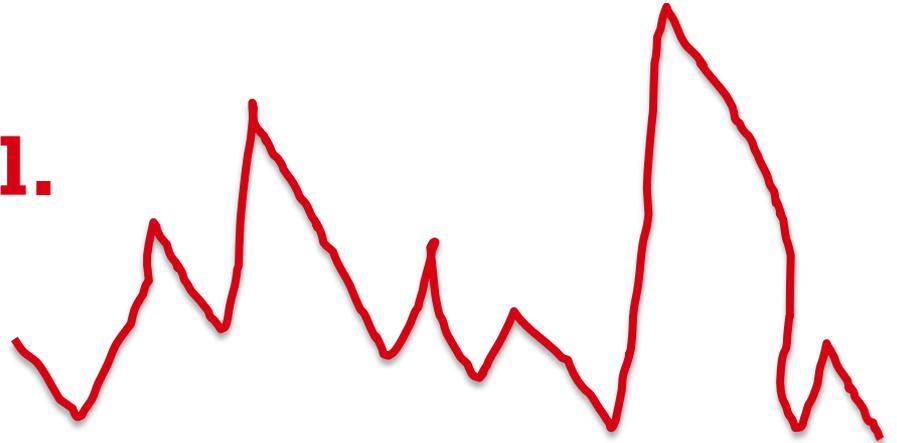
Age Crime Curve



**Recidivating desisters?
Desisting recidivists?**

**It's not a coin flip.
It's not dichotomous.**

**Desistance is temporal.
It's multifaceted.**



Method

74 Participants

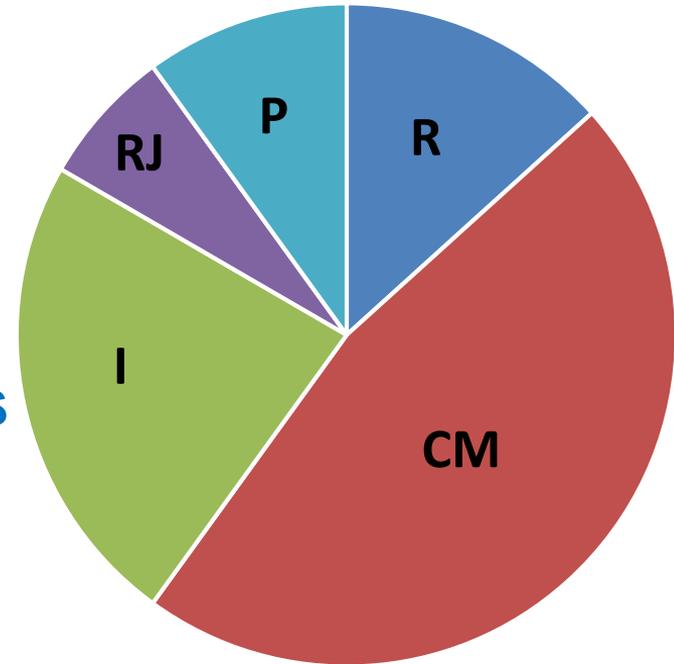
Men in Massachusetts and Maine

Age: **53 years** (Range: 24-78 years)

Ethnicity: 88% White

Time in custody (most recent): **10.1 years**
(Range: 4 months - 38 years)

Time on street (since release): **4.1 years**
(Range: 1 month - 21 years)



Procedure

- Individual, face-to-face, semi-structured interview using the Life History Interview Protocol
- \$25 gift card (community)
- \$10 account credit (incarcerated)
- Interviews transcribed manually, re-experienced many times
- Narrative Analysis using Nvivo (and index cards & post-its)
- Examined themes that emerged naturally

Research Questions (beginner's mind)

Definition of **desistance**

How long?

From when?

From what?

How do we know?

(self report → custody)



Definition of **recidivism**

Sexual or not?

Repeat? Escalation?

Follow up period?

How do we know?

(self report → custody)

Results:
from what did they desist?

offense scenarios

isolated offenses

single victim over time

multiple victims,
one sentence

sexual recidivism

single
incident

relational
child
molestation

short term,
opportunistic

long term,
low
functioning

mixed term,
sexually
motivated

spree rape

abuse of
known
children

rape

abuse of
stranger
children

persistence

recidivism

Results:
what strategies did they use?

Strategies of desistance

retire

regulate

recover

resign

rebuild

restrict

recluse

resist

rehearse

rehabilitate

resilient

retire

n = 15

Past (*over it*)

age out, knife off
two lives, young,
substance abuse,
versatile criminal
histories, reject label

Some (social capital)
have begun to rebuild

regulate

n = 34

Present (*here and now*)

hypervigilant, struggling,
low functioning, suicidal,
paralysed by legislation,
great loss, no social
capital, loners, superficial
grasp of therapy buzz
words, resent label, no
escape

recover

n = 22

Future (*hope*)

therapy works, high
functioning, family,
job, impressive social
capital, mentors,
moving on, service,
“redemption,”
embrace label

Retire: resign

I'm not like I used to be.
I don't get violent. I don't
drink and do drugs today.
I don't let the little things
get to me like I used to.
(Jacob)

I'm tired of living that kind of
lifestyle. I'm getting older.
I'm a grandfather. **I want to
have a different lifestyle** at
least for the rest of the years
that I have left in my life.
(Raoul)

I have two lives. **I have the
life before and the life
since I got out of prison.**
The life that I'm living now is
the only time as an adult
I've lived without going out
and acting on my sexual
deviancy. So, it's as if I
finally have a life. (Ross)

I'm done. **I can't do it
anymore.** I've decided I just
don't want to do it anymore.
(Reed)

Retire: rebuild

Right now my life is at the height. I opened my own business, you know? **I'm doing really, really good. I bought a house. I'm engaged to be married. I got a truck that's paid for. I got a Corvette that's paid for. I got a pool in my backyard...** I'm actually doing better now than my own brothers (Todd)

I changed my life. **I changed my life in a lot of different ways.** I changed from someone who was getting high, smoking weed, and drinking, to someone who cared about his physical being. So it started with that, and then it went to pretty much a complete change of who I am. (Joel)

I've went through a lot since I've been out. I mean, I make choices how to deal with it. You know, sometimes life sucks, and you know something? Life sucks for everybody sometimes, you know? **It's just something you got to deal with, you know? I'm not a victim.** I mean, I'm part of a life cycle. (Dylan)

Regulate: restrict

The future is not all that positive in my mind.
I welcome death (Mason)

It's on my mind every day. I'm not looking for trouble or making trouble. (Rupert)

It goes through my mind, y'know? When I go outside, I'm thinking, "what's going to happen? **I hope nothing happens today. I hope nobody accuses me of something.**" I always have my aunt with me. Y'know, for a witness. (Jacob)

If I go to a house, I'm going to be with someone all the time. **I'm not going to do anything by myself alone, ever alone, ever again.** I'm going to do it the same way [his friend] did it. If he can do it. I can do it. I'm always going to go around with someone. One, or two, or three people all the time. Every time. (Mitchell)

Regulate: recluse

I tend to isolate and my life has gotten to a point where isolating is even easier because I just don't have people to do stuff with. (Anthony)

There's nothing out there for me. I just made bad decisions. I know I can't make it out there on my own. I don't want to go to the crazy world. I don't want to go out there. If I go out there I'll come back. I'm still Jared. Jared is still Jared. I'll do it again... **There's nothing out there for me. Not even the bushes.** (Jared)

Nope. I don't need it. **I just don't really care if I have kids or not.** (Rodney)

Regulate: resist

I've been kicked out of groups because I've challenged them... I've run into just one treater that was qualified. The people [here] you know? **If they were qualified, they would have regular jobs.** (Dean)

I can't have an alibi for everywhere I go. I mean, I got no alibi for where I am right now. You know? I have no alibi. **If I get blamed for anything, I'm already in the wrong. I'm on probation, I'm a sex offender.** You know what I mean? I'm a convict. I got three strikes before I even walk out my door. (Damien)

Their (PO's) job is to put me back in prison...I'm a law abiding citizen and everything, it's just that, y'know? and it's just, it doesn't, I've learned **it doesn't matter whether you're guilty or not, it's who can play the game the best at this** (Adam)

Regulate: rehearse

I'm doing everything that I'm supposed to be doing...My primary goal is to stay out of trouble and do what I'm supposed to do. (Rupert)

I got the tools that I need, which they call a tool box, where you have things in it to stop you, and prevent you from doing something. (Damien)

The warning sign for me is when I don't have a structure - right now I have structure. Right now I have a full-time job, I come to group, I go to probation, and there's a couple of other things I do during the week, I go and see my grandmother...So for me, **my biggest thing is giving myself a structure**. 'Cos when I have structure that's when I succeed. When I lose a piece of my structure, that's when I start screwing up. (Morgan)

Recover: rehabilitate

And I said, y'know, no matter what, **I'm gonna do everything in my power to make sure that I have opportunities to help other people.** If I can do anything to help things like this from never happening again, then I am going to. (Ben)

I feel really good at understanding psychology, understanding human behavior, understanding sexual offending behavior. (Ross)

I volunteer as a mentor for sex offenders...I try to share my experience to help them with what they are going through...I've been involved in counseling for 15 years and I've heard every story, and so I feel it's useful, and I think coming from a peer in a group, sometimes is more effective... **It gives me a sense of being able to put something back, a sense of being productive.** (Jason)

In here I have all this knowledge, but I don't have that outside. So I feel important, having a sense of meaning and purpose. Maybe if I got out, I don't know, that would disappear. (Theo)

Recover: resilient

I live a life that's a testament to how to turn things around, how to reclaim, and how to redeem, you know, what seems to be the worst possible place you can go, how you can take life back and live in a positive way. (Ross)

You know what? I'm a registered sex offender. **Get over it!** (Mitch)

I'm labeled as a level 3 sex offender. Uh, but I tell ya, I think I'm stronger mentally. **I'm more determined.** More focused. (Freddy)

The only thing I can do is try to do something else and try to be positive because, just because other people have this stigma that we are all bad...y'know, I can't stop looking, y'know, **I gotta try.** (Jason)

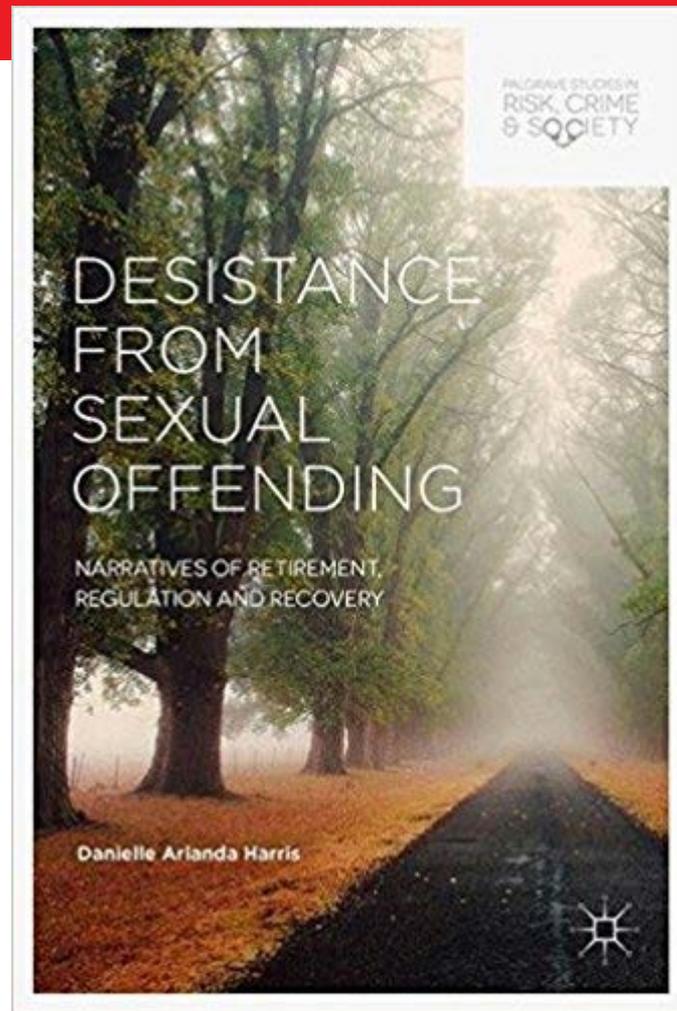
Where Do We Go From Here?

Conclusions

- Taken together, desistance remains the typical outcome
- We know what doesn't work. Let's focus on what does.
- ...Paradigm shift...
- Instead of focusing on understanding recidivism, why not focus on examining and deconstructing desistance?
- Focus on facilitating and encouraging that natural process
- How much intervention is enough?

Recommendations

- Accept desistance as a modal and natural outcome
- Change our therapeutic emphasis from sexual deviance to general life skills
- Honour the passage of time by considering conviction expiry dates and reducing risk scores over time
- Generate a tiered system that recognises heterogeneity of people and behaviours
- ~~Repeal the publicly available sex offender register~~ *Never introduce!*
- Educate the press and the public on the empirical realities of sexual abuse





Thank you

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photos by Simon Teeporten, Studio T

