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Desistance and correctional interventions: a comparative analysis of theoretical approaches and practical outcomes in criminal justice systems

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Abstract. The concept of desistance from crime has gained increasing attention as a critical framework for understanding long-term behavioral change among offenders. This article offers a comparative analysis of desistance-oriented correctional interventions across different criminal justice systems, with a focus on how theoretical paradigms—such as cognitive-behavioral, narrative identity, and restorative justice approaches—influence practical rehabilitation outcomes. Drawing on empirical studies and policy evaluations, the paper contrasts intervention models implemented in both punitive and rehabilitative contexts, including those in Northern and Western Europe, North America, and emerging programs in Eastern Europe. The analysis emphasizes the role of psychosocial factors, institutional culture, and post-release support mechanisms in fostering sustained desistance. Findings suggest that interventions aligned with the principles of procedural justice, individualized support, and identity reconstruction are more effective in promoting long-term disengagement from criminal behavior. The article concludes with implications for policy development and the design of correctional programs, highlighting the need for culturally responsive and evidence-based practices that support the complex pathways toward desistance.

Keywords. Desistance from crime, correctional interventions, narrative identity, restorative justice, criminal justice systems

1. Introduction

The concept of desistance from crime has become central to contemporary understandings of criminal behavior and rehabilitation, marking a paradigmatic shift away from punitive approaches toward more person-centered and strengths-based frameworks (McNeill et al., 2012; Weaver, 2016). Desistance is broadly defined as the process through which individuals cease engaging in criminal behavior, either permanently or for significant periods (Maruna, 2001). Scholars typically distinguish between three stages of desistance: *primary desistance*, referring to the initial cessation of offending behavior; *secondary desistance*, which entails a more profound internalization of a non-criminal identity; and *tertiary desistance*, which involves societal recognition and reintegration into prosocial roles (Farrall, 2002; Nugent & Schinkel, 2016).

While recidivism remains the dominant metric in evaluating correctional interventions, it has been increasingly criticized as a reductive and overly simplistic indicator of success (Kazemian, 2007; McNeill, 2019). Recidivism rates often fail to account for the complexity of behavioral change, the social and structural conditions that shape post-release trajectories, and the subjective experiences of individuals striving to desist. In contrast, desistance research emphasizes the dynamic and nonlinear nature of personal transformation, acknowledging the importance of identity reconstruction, social bonds, employment, and meaning-making in the process of disengagement from crime (Giordano et al., 2002; McAdams & Pals, 2006).

This article is situated within a growing body of literature that advocates for the integration of desistance theory into correctional policy and practice (Healy, 2010; Weaver & McNeill, 2015). Its primary aim is to conduct a comparative analysis of how different correctional systems operationalize desistance, with attention to both the theoretical underpinnings and the practical outcomes of intervention models. Specifically, the paper seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. How do theoretical paradigms of desistance influence the design and implementation of correctional interventions in various national contexts?
2. What are the similarities and differences in the outcomes of desistance-informed programs across punitive and rehabilitative criminal justice systems?
3. What are the implications for policy reform and practice in social work, probation, and reintegration services?

In addressing these questions, the paper begins with an overview of the main theoretical approaches to desistance, including cognitive-behavioral, narrative, and structural models. It then explores correctional practices across different national systems, focusing on comparative examples from Western Europe, North America, and Eastern Europe. The subsequent sections evaluate intervention outcomes, consider methodological challenges in desistance research, and reflect on policy implications for social workers and other professionals engaged in the rehabilitation process. Ultimately, the paper argues for a deeper embedding of desistance principles into the architecture of correctional and reintegrative services, calling for a holistic, person-centered, and socially responsive model of criminal justice.

2. Theoretical frameworks underpinning desistance

Desistance research has evolved significantly in the past three decades, generating multiple theoretical frameworks that seek to explain how and why individuals cease engaging in criminal behavior. These frameworks reflect a spectrum of disciplinary perspectives, ranging from psychology and sociology to narrative theory and legal philosophy. While each approach brings its own epistemological assumptions and methodological implications, collectively they contribute to a richer understanding of the desistance process and inform more responsive and effective correctional interventions.

2.1. Cognitive-behavioral theories

Cognitive-behavioral approaches remain the most commonly implemented frameworks in correctional programming, grounded in the premise that maladaptive thinking patterns and distorted cognitive schemas underlie much criminal behavior (Lipsey, Landenberger, & Wilson, 2007). These theories focus on restructuring criminal thinking through techniques such as cognitive restructuring, problem-solving skills training, and self-regulation strategies (Andrews & Bonta, 2010). Programs based on the Risk-Need-Responsivity

(RNR) model emphasize reducing criminogenic needs—particularly antisocial cognition—as a central mechanism of change (Andrews et al., 2011).

Although cognitive-behavioral interventions (CBIs) have been shown to reduce recidivism, especially in the short to medium term, critics argue that they often overlook deeper identity shifts and contextual factors necessary for long-term desistance (McNeill, 2006; Ward & Maruna, 2007). Nevertheless, CBIs remain an essential starting point, particularly when combined with motivational interviewing and trauma-informed approaches to enhance individual engagement and self-efficacy (Ross, Polaschek, & Ward, 2008).

2.2. Narrative and identity-based approaches

In contrast to cognitive models that focus on behavioral control, narrative and identity-based theories view desistance as a process of self-reconstruction and personal meaning-making. Maruna's (2001) seminal work introduced the idea that sustained desistance is rooted in the construction of a "redemption script"—a coherent personal narrative in which the individual sees themselves as a changed person, with agency and purpose. This approach highlights the importance of internal motivation, moral agency, and the ability to envision a prosocial future (McAdams, 2013).

Building on these insights, theories of identity desistance emphasize the interplay between internal self-concept and external social recognition. Successful desistance often depends on both self-perception and the acknowledgment by others—such as family, employers, or community members—that the person has changed (LeBel et al., 2008). These models have informed narrative-based interventions such as desistance diaries, reflective storytelling, and life-mapping exercises used in social work and probation practice (Farrall, 2014; Nugent & Schinkel, 2016).

2.3. Social and structural theories

Social and structural theories of desistance focus on the enabling role of life circumstances and social bonds. Sampson and Laub's (1993) life-course theory emphasizes the salience of turning points—such as stable employment, marriage, or military service—in creating new pathways away from crime. These models attribute desistance not only to individual agency but also to relational and institutional supports that reinforce prosocial behavior and reduce exposure to criminogenic environments (Laub & Sampson, 2003).

From a social work perspective, this framework underscores the significance of addressing structural inequalities—such as housing instability, poverty, and lack of educational opportunities—that undermine reintegration efforts (Fitzpatrick & Taylor, 2015). Social capital, particularly in the form of supportive relationships and community integration, is frequently identified as a protective factor in sustaining long-term desistance (Savolainen, 2009; Weaver, 2016).

2.4. Restorative justice and procedural justice models

Restorative justice (RJ) and procedural justice models emphasize relational repair, fairness, and voice as critical mechanisms for promoting desistance. In restorative paradigms, the process of acknowledging harm, accepting responsibility, and engaging in victim-offender dialogue can catalyze moral transformation and social reintegration (Braithwaite, 2002; Sherman & Strang, 2007). RJ programs have shown promise in fostering empathy, rebuilding community trust, and reducing reoffending, especially among young and first-time offenders (Latimer, Dowden, & Muise, 2005).

Procedural justice, in turn, focuses on the fairness and legitimacy of institutional processes. Research suggests that when individuals perceive the criminal justice system as respectful, transparent, and impartial, they are more likely to comply with legal norms and engage constructively with rehabilitative services (Tyler, 2006; McNeill, 2012). These insights are increasingly integrated into parole board hearings, community supervision, and court procedures, reinforcing the idea that how justice is delivered may matter as much as what is delivered (Weaver, 2016).

Together, these theoretical perspectives form a robust, multidimensional understanding of desistance, each contributing valuable insights to the design of effective correctional interventions. A truly desistance-oriented approach requires integrating cognitive change, identity transformation, social inclusion, and relational justice—while also acknowledging the structural conditions that shape individual choices.

3. Comparative correctional models: a cross-national perspective

Analyzing correctional systems through a desistance lens reveals significant cross-national differences in how societies approach rehabilitation, punishment, and reintegration. While desistance is increasingly acknowledged as a key framework in criminal justice reform, its practical implementation varies due to cultural, political, and institutional factors (Pratt, 2008; Durnescu, 2011). This section offers a comparative perspective on correctional practices in Northern and Western Europe, North America, and Eastern and Southern Europe, with emphasis on their alignment with desistance-based principles.

Correctional systems in countries such as Norway and the Netherlands emphasize rehabilitation, normalization, and humane prison environments. In Norway, the principle of *normality* guides prison life—ensuring that incarceration conditions resemble life in the community as closely as possible (Dirth & Ugelvik, 2021). Norwegian prisons implement *dynamic security*, where staff build trust-based relationships with inmates, enabling safe, prosocial interactions that support rehabilitation (Kilmer, Abdel-Salam, & Silver, 2023). Personal officers in Norwegian prisons support individualized reintegration plans, reflecting a deeply relational and person-centered correctional culture.

The Netherlands similarly invests in individualized assessments, such as the BRIK tool, which help align services with the specific needs and strengths of offenders (Hansen & Samuelsen, 2014). Although some shifts toward risk management have occurred, Dutch correctional philosophy remains grounded in responsivity and reintegration. These countries consistently demonstrate that desistance can be effectively supported when dignity, autonomy, and trust are embedded into institutional design (McNeill & Schinkel, 2016; Pratt, 2008).

North America presents a more dichotomous picture. The United States largely adheres to punitive correctional models, emphasizing deterrence, incapacitation, and long sentences, which have resulted in high incarceration rates and systemic inequities (Alexander, 2010). Rehabilitative programs exist but are inconsistently implemented and rarely informed by desistance theory.

In contrast, Canada has pioneered community-based reintegration models aligned with desistance, such as the *Circles of Support and Accountability* (CoSA) for individuals convicted of sexual offenses. These volunteer-driven circles provide social support, accountability, and relational reinforcement post-release. Empirical evaluations indicate significant reductions in recidivism for CoSA participants compared to control groups (Wilson, Cortoni, & McWhinnie, 2009; Höing, Bogaerts, & Vogelvang, 2015). CoSA reflects restorative values central to desistance, such as reintegration through trust, responsibility, and community involvement

(Clarke, Brown, & Völlm, 2015). Canada's approach highlights the potential for effective desistance-oriented models, even within systems that historically leaned toward punishment.

Correctional systems in Eastern and Southern Europe, including Romania and Poland, operate within transitional justice frameworks. Legacies of authoritarianism, combined with resource constraints, create challenges for embedding evidence-based and desistance-informed practices (Durnescu, 2011; Pop & Durnescu, 2017). In Romania, steps have been taken to align correctional policy with European norms through individualized sentence planning and psycho-social interventions. However, implementation is inconsistent due to institutional overload and limited professional training (Desistance-related skills in Romanian probation contexts, 2022).

Programs inspired by the Risk-Need-Responsivity model, sometimes combined with Good Lives Model components, are slowly emerging in Romanian probation services. Yet ethnographic research indicates that stigma, unemployment, and weak post-release support remain substantial barriers to desistance (Durnescu, 2017). Similarly, in Poland, while restorative practices such as family mediation are gaining visibility, systemic support and long-term investment in desistance pathways are still lacking (Lelental, 2020). These contexts show that while theoretical alignment with desistance may exist, practical implementation requires cultural change, interagency collaboration, and sustained political will (Durnescu & Istrate, 2020).

4. Evaluation of correctional interventions

Evaluating the effectiveness of correctional interventions through a desistance lens requires a paradigm shift from recidivism-focused metrics toward more nuanced, person-centered indicators. While recidivism remains a conventional benchmark for assessing post-release behavior, it fails to capture the gradual, non-linear, and deeply subjective nature of desistance. This section examines methodological challenges in desistance research and proposes alternative indicators of intervention success, with an emphasis on identity transformation, agency, and social integration.

Research on desistance increasingly favors qualitative longitudinal designs, which allow for the tracking of personal narratives, identity reconstruction, and changes in motivation over time (McNeill & Schinkel, 2016; Durnescu, 2017). Unlike static, snapshot measures such as reoffending within a fixed timeframe, longitudinal qualitative approaches can reveal the internal struggles and external turning points that characterize desistance trajectories.

Such methods foreground the lived experience of offenders, enabling researchers and practitioners to understand desistance not merely as behavioral cessation but as a dynamic process of "becoming" a different person (Dirth & Ugelvik, 2021). Studies based on interviews, life history calendars, and reflective writing—such as those conducted in Norway and Romania—have shown how personal relationships, institutional trust, and perceived legitimacy influence the sustainability of desistance (Pop & Durnescu, 2017; Kilmer, Abdel-Salam, & Silver, 2023). These narratives provide a richer foundation for evaluating interventions than statistical correlations alone.

Furthermore, narrative-based evaluations are essential in contexts where formal program data may be incomplete or not adequately capture individual transformation—particularly in transitional systems like Romania or Poland (Durnescu & Istrate, 2020). Here, the use of narrative tools in probation work helps professionals detect shifts in offender self-concept, aspirations, and coping strategies, which are all critical markers of progress toward desistance.

Traditional outcome measures such as reconviction rates obscure the deeper psychosocial changes that correctional interventions seek to foster. Desistance research highlights the need to assess identity change, sense of agency, and prosocial engagement as core indicators of effectiveness (McNeill & Schinkel, 2016; Durnescu, 2011). For instance, participants in the Circles of Support and Accountability (CoSA) program in Canada reported not only reduced recidivism, but also increased trust in community members, higher levels of personal responsibility, and a stronger commitment to change (Wilson, Cortoni, & McWhinnie, 2009; Höing, Bogaerts, & Vogelvang, 2015).

In Norway, prison cultures oriented around dynamic security and normalized environments have been linked to improved relational outcomes between inmates and staff, as well as enhanced institutional safety (Dirth & Ugelvik, 2021; Kilmer et al., 2023). These relational dynamics—though less quantifiable—are vital for creating correctional climates conducive to rehabilitation and long-term change.

Cross-national comparisons suggest that contextual variables such as staff training, policy coherence, and social stigma play significant roles in shaping desistance outcomes. While Western and Northern European models tend to integrate relational and psychosocial goals explicitly into their evaluation frameworks, systems in Eastern Europe often lack the infrastructure for tracking such soft indicators (Durnescu & Istrate, 2020; Pop & Durnescu, 2017).

Nevertheless, innovative practices in Romania, such as desistance-related skills training and reflective journaling in probation, show promise in operationalizing these more complex metrics (Desistance-related skills in Romanian probation contexts, 2022). These efforts highlight a growing recognition of the importance of measuring “what matters”—not merely what is easy to count.

5. Discussion

The integration of desistance theory into correctional practice offers a transformative shift from risk-based, punitive models to person-centered and strengths-based approaches. Across jurisdictions, theoretical alignment with desistance principles—such as identity reconstruction, agency development, and relational support—has been linked to more meaningful and sustainable intervention outcomes (Maruna & LeBel, 2012; McNeill & Schinkel, 2016; de Vel-Palumbo, Halsey, & Day, 2023). Interventions that explicitly address the subjective and social processes involved in “becoming” a non-offender—rather than simply ceasing crime—are more likely to promote lasting change (Farrall & Maruna, 2004; Dirth & Ugelvik, 2021).

Findings from correctional contexts such as Norway and Canada underscore how programs designed around desistance narratives, personal officer engagement, dynamic security, and community-based accountability (e.g., CoSA) contribute to more holistic and respectful forms of offender management (Wilson et al., 2009; Kilmer, Abdel-Salam, & Silver, 2023). These programs create conditions for individuals to be seen not merely as risks, but as capable of growth and contribution—a perspective aligned with ecological and humanistic models of intervention (Burnett, 2010; Cadariu & Rad, 2025).

However, cultural and systemic barriers continue to impede widespread implementation of desistance-informed interventions. In transitional contexts such as Romania and Poland, challenges include under-resourced probation systems, high caseloads, inconsistent training, and residual punitive cultures (Durnescu, 2011; Pop & Durnescu, 2017). Moreover, the persistence of recidivism as the dominant metric of success inhibits innovation and

investment in more complex, qualitative forms of evaluation (MacKenzie, 2014). These issues are compounded by social stigma, limited inter-agency collaboration, and the absence of reintegration infrastructure such as housing, education, and employment programs (Durnescu & Istrate, 2020; Gavrilă-Ardelean & Moldovan, 2014).

Furthermore, interventions often neglect psychosocial dimensions of reentry, such as mental well-being, social identity, and emotional regulation—elements that are increasingly understood as mediators of deviant behavior (Demeter et al., 2024; Marici, Rad, & Runcan, 2024). Programs that incorporate ecological momentary strategies, trauma-informed care, and narrative identity work show promising potential for enhancing reintegration outcomes (Cadariu & Rad, 2025; Maruna, 2016). These approaches align with contemporary research in social work and psychology advocating for real-time, context-sensitive interventions tailored to individuals' dynamic needs (Gavrilă-Ardeleana, 2016; Chiș et al., 2024).

To bridge the gap between theory and practice, a holistic, multi-sectoral approach is required. Desistance is not merely the responsibility of correctional agencies—it depends on educational institutions, mental health services, employers, and communities to co-construct environments conducive to change (Maruna & Mann, 2019; Clarke, Brown, & Völlm, 2015). Promoting employability, digital skills, and civic inclusion is especially important for young and marginalized populations, including those exiting custodial care (Gavrilă-Ardelean & Gavrilă-Ardelean, 2017; Gavrilă-Ardeleana, 2016). Interdisciplinary collaboration can thus serve as a powerful mechanism for scaling desistance-oriented innovations, particularly in contexts marked by institutional fragility or reform fatigue.

In sum, the discussion reaffirms that theoretical clarity, cultural readiness, and systemic coherence are foundational to the effective implementation of desistance-informed interventions. Where interventions have succeeded, they reflect a convergence of relational justice, psychological insight, and community engagement—elements that should be prioritized in policy and practice moving forward.

6. Policy and practice implications

As the desistance paradigm gains traction in correctional theory and practice, its integration into policy and institutional culture remains uneven. Effective translation of desistance theory into systemic change requires a strategic focus on three key areas: staff training, intersectoral partnerships, and sustained investment in evidence-based and context-sensitive interventions (McNeill, 2006; Porporino, 2013; Mihăilă et al., 2025).

One of the foremost requirements for institutionalizing desistance-based approaches is staff development. Correctional staff—particularly those in direct supervision roles—must move beyond punitive, compliance-based models toward relational, humanistic, and autonomy-supportive practices (McNeill, 2004; Ward, 2017). This implies not only technical upskilling but also reflective training in narrative practices, identity-sensitive engagement, and trauma-informed ethics (Runcan, Runcan, Rad, & Cădariu, 2025).

Research has consistently shown that protective factors, such as staff empathy, perceived legitimacy, and support for personal agency, play a pivotal role in rehabilitation outcomes (Polaschek, 2017; Ward, 2017). Petrich (2020), drawing on self-determination theory, emphasized that fostering intrinsic motivation and competence in individuals under supervision enhances long-term behavioral change. Therefore, staff education should be framed not only as an administrative necessity but as a central mechanism in promoting desistance.

Training models informed by reflective supervision and learning organization principles are particularly relevant in this context (Vișcu & Rad, 2024; Viscu, Rad, Cadariu, &

Pintea, 2025). These approaches encourage professionals to critically assess their own beliefs, biases, and relational strategies while remaining adaptive to clients' evolving needs.

Desistance is not achieved in isolation. Reintegration depends heavily on the social environment into which individuals return, making multi-agency collaboration a cornerstone of successful post-release outcomes (McNeill & Schinkel, 2020; Mihăilă et al., 2025). Partnerships between correctional services, community mental health providers, housing agencies, educational institutions, and employers are essential to address the multifaceted nature of reintegration challenges.

In particular, social work institutions play a crucial intermediary role, bridging individual needs with structural resources and relational supports (Runcan, Marici, & Rad, 2024; Vîșcu & Rad, 2025). Studies in both correctional and social work domains confirm that access to employment, counseling, and supervised autonomy post-release predicts better psychosocial and behavioral outcomes (Rad et al., 2024; Vîșcu & Rad, 2024).

Furthermore, facilitating trauma-informed reintegration—as advocated by Runcan et al. (2025)—ensures that post-release interventions do not reproduce the same control-based and hierarchical dynamics that contributed to the individual's marginalization. Community partnerships grounded in mutual respect, dignity, and capability-building are critical to making desistance sustainable beyond institutional walls.

Finally, policy must reflect a commitment to evidence-based program development that accounts for both universal principles and local specificities. Desistance is not a one-size-fits-all process; it requires flexible models tailored to personal histories, social identities, and cultural contexts (Porporino, 2013; Petrich, 2020).

Programs must also be evaluated using appropriate success indicators, beyond recidivism—such as self-efficacy, relational growth, identity coherence, and agency (McNeill, 2006; Mihăilă et al., 2025). Cross-disciplinary research from social work, psychology, and criminology has emphasized the need for integrating protective factors into program design and outcome assessment (Ward, 2017; Polaschek, 2017). This implies sustained funding for longitudinal evaluation, qualitative research, and staff-practitioner collaboration (McNeill & Schinkel, 2020; Vîșcu, Rad, & Pintea, 2025).

Ethical and technological considerations must also inform practice, particularly as digital interventions and artificial intelligence gain ground in the rehabilitation landscape (Runcan et al., 2025). Programs must remain sensitive to issues of privacy, autonomy, and human dignity, especially in working with vulnerable populations.

Thus, a policy environment conducive to desistance requires coordinated investment in human capital, institutional culture, inter-organizational networks, and ethical innovation. As recent studies in the field demonstrate, sustainable desistance emerges not only from the “what works” of programs but from the “who cares” of relationships and systems that recognize human potential (Maruna & Mann, 2019; McNeill, 2004).

7. Conclusion

This article has explored the diverse ways in which desistance is understood, operationalized, and supported across correctional systems in Europe and North America. The comparative analysis reveals that theoretical alignment with desistance principles—such as identity transformation, agency development, and relational engagement—is strongly associated with more effective and sustainable outcomes (McNeill, 2006; Maruna & LeBel, 2012; de Vel-Palumbo, Halsey, & Day, 2023). In contexts such as Norway, the Netherlands, and Canada, interventions grounded in rehabilitation, normalization, and community-based

accountability foster safer institutional climates and meaningful reintegration (Dirth & Ugelvik, 2021; Wilson, Cortoni, & McWhinnie, 2009).

By contrast, correctional systems in Eastern and Southern Europe, while increasingly receptive to desistance-informed ideas, face considerable structural and cultural barriers in implementing them effectively (Durnescu, 2011; Mihăilă et al., 2025). These findings underscore the importance of not only adopting theoretical frameworks but also embedding them within the daily practices, training models, and institutional cultures of correctional systems.

The discussion highlighted that desistance is not merely the absence of offending, but a deeply personal and social process involving the reconstruction of one's identity, relationships, and place in society (Farrall & Maruna, 2004; McNeill & Schinkel, 2020). To capture this complexity, future interventions and evaluations must adopt longitudinal, culturally grounded, and person-centered methodologies—especially in transitional systems where desistance narratives are shaped by institutional legacies, community stigma, and socioeconomic precarity (Pop & Durnescu, 2017; Petrich, 2020).

Additionally, future research should prioritize interdisciplinary designs that connect criminological theory with psychological constructs (e.g., motivation, trauma, well-being), digital and ecological innovation (Cadariu & Rad, 2025; Runcan et al., 2025), and social work perspectives on reintegration and ethical practice (Viscu & Rad, 2025; Ward, 2017). This will require collaboration across sectors, the development of integrated measurement frameworks, and robust funding structures that allow for qualitative, narrative-rich evaluations over time.

In closing, the desistance paradigm offers more than a new way of thinking about crime; it demands a reimagining of how society relates to those who have offended. A commitment to rehabilitation over retribution, relationship over risk, and hope over control must guide the future of correctional policy, practice, and scholarship. The challenge ahead lies not in identifying what works, but in building the institutional courage to act on what is known—and in doing so, foster the human potential for change.

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